

Ahmed SEFRIOUI

The box of wonders

novel



Chapter I

In the evening, when everyone is asleep, the rich in their warm blankets, the poor on the steps of shops or under the porches of palaces, I do not sleep. I think of my solitude and I feel all its weight. My solitude does not date from yesterday.

I see, at the end of a dead end that the sun never visits, a little boy of six, setting a trap to catch a sparrow but the sparrow never comes. He wants this little sparrow so much! He will not eat it, he will not torture it. He wants to make it his companion. Barefoot, on the damp earth, he runs to the end of the alley to see the donkeys go by and comes back to sit on the doorstep of the house and wait for the arrival of the sparrow which does not come. In the evening, he comes home with a heavy heart and red eyes, swinging at the end of his little arm, a trap made of copper wire.

We lived in Dar Chouafa, the fortune teller's house. Indeed, on the ground floor, lived a fortune teller of great reputation. From the most distant neighborhoods, women of all walks of life came to consult her. She was a fortune teller and something of a witch. A follower of the Gnaoua brotherhood (people of Guinea), she offered herself, once a month, a session of black music and dances. Clouds of benzoin filled the house and the rattlesnakes and guimbris prevented us from sleeping, all night long.

I didn't understand anything about the complicated ritual that was taking place on the ground floor. From our second-floor window, I could make out the silhouettes gesticulating through the smoke of the aromatics. They were tinkling their strange instruments. I could hear you-yous. The dresses were sometimes sky blue, sometimes blood red, sometimes a flaming yellow. The days after these celebrations were dreary, sadder and grayer than ordinary days. I got up early to go to the Msid, a Koranic school located a stone's throw from the house. The sounds of the night were still rolling in my head, the smell of benzoin and incense intoxicated me. Around me, the jnouns prowled, the black demons evoked by the witch and her friends with a frenzy that bordered on delirium. I felt the jnouns brushing me with their burning fingers; I heard their laughter as if it were stormy nights. With my index fingers in my ears, I shouted the verses traced on my board with an accent of despair.

The two rooms on the ground floor were occupied by the main tenant, Chouafa. On the first floor lived Driss El Aouad, his wife Rahma and their daughter a year older than me. Her name was Zineb and I didn't like her. This whole family had a single room, Rahma did the cooking on the landing. We shared the second floor with Fatma Bziouya. Our two windows faced each other and looked out onto the patio, an old patio whose tiles had long since lost their colored enamel and which looked like it was paved with bricks. It was washed every day with plenty of water and scrubbed with a doum broom. The jnouns liked cleanliness. Chouafa's clients had a good impression from the moment they entered, an impression of cleanliness and peace that invited abandonment, confidences - all elements that helped the clairvoyant to reveal the future more surely.

There were no customers every day. As inexplicable as it may seem, there was the off-season. It was impossible to predict when it would occur. Suddenly, women stopped using love potions, worried less about their future, no longer complained about their back pains, shoulder blades or stomach pains, no demons tormented them.

The Chouafa chose these few months of truce to take care of her own health. She discovered ailments that her science could not alleviate. The devils hallucinated her, were demanding as to the color of the caftans, the time to wear them, the aromatics that had to be burned in such and such a circumstance. And in the darkness of her large room hung with cretonne, the chouafa moaned, complained, conjured, dried up in clouds of incense and benzoin.

I was maybe six years old. My memory was like fresh wax, and the smallest events were etched into it as indelible images. I have this album to brighten my solitude, to prove to myself that I am not yet dead.

At six years old I was alone, perhaps unhappy, but I had no point of reference that allowed me to call my existence: solitude or unhappiness.

I was neither happy nor unhappy. I was a lonely child. I knew that. Not shy by nature, I began some timid friendships with the children of the Koranic school, but they were short-lived. We inhabited different universes. I had a penchant for dreams. The world seemed to me a fabulous domain, a grandiose fairyland where witches maintained a familiar commerce with invisible powers. I wanted the Invisible to admit me to participate in its mysteries. My little friends at school were content with the visible, especially when this visible materialized in sweets of a celestial blue or the pink of the setting sun. They liked to nibble, suck, and bite into them with gusto. They also liked to play at fighting, to attack each other by the throat with airs of murder, to shout to imitate their father's voice, to insult each other to imitate the neighbors, to order each other around to imitate the schoolmaster.

I didn't want to imitate anything, I wanted to know.

Abdallah, the grocer, told me of the exploits of a magnificent king who lived in a land of light, flowers and perfumes, beyond the Seas of Darkness, beyond the Great Wall. And I wanted to make a pact with the invisible powers that obeyed the witches so that they would take me beyond the Seas of Darkness and beyond the Great Wall, to live in this land of light, perfumes and flowers.

My father told me about Paradise. But to be reborn there, one had to die first. My father added that killing oneself was a great sin, a sin that barred access to this kingdom. So, I had only one solution: wait! Wait to become a man, wait to die to be reborn on the banks of the Salsabil River. Wait! That is what it means to exist. At this idea, I certainly felt no fear. I woke up in the morning, I did what I was told to do. In the evening, the sun disappeared and I went back to sleep to start again the next day. I knew that one day was added to another, I knew that days made months, that months became seasons, and seasons the year. I am six years old, next year I will be seven and then eight, nine and ten. At ten, one is almost a man. At ten years old, you can walk around the whole neighborhood alone, you can chat with the merchants, you can write, at least your name, you can consult a fortune teller about your future, learn magic words, compose talismans.

Meanwhile, I was alone in the middle of a swarm of shaved heads, wet noses, in a daze of shouting of sacred verses.

The school was at the gate of Derb Noualla. The fqih, a tall, thin man with a black beard, whose eyes constantly flashed flames of anger, lived on Jiaf Street. I knew this street. I knew that at the end of a dark and damp passage, there was a low door from which escaped, all day long, a continuous hubbub of women's voices and children's cries.

The first time I heard that noise, I burst into tears because I recognized the voices. of Hell as my father described them one evening.

My mother calmed me down:

- I'll take you for a bath, I'll promise you an orange and a hard-boiled egg and you find a way to bray like a donkey!

Still hiccuping, I replied:

- I don't want to go to Hell.

She rolled her eyes and fell silent, confused by so much silliness.

I don't think I've ever set foot in a Moorish bath since I was a child. A vague apprehension and a feeling of unease have always prevented me from crossing the threshold. On reflection, I don't like Moorish baths. The promiscuity, the sort of shamelessness and carelessness that people feel obliged to affect in such places put me off.

Even as a child, I could smell a smell of sin over all that swarming of wet bodies, in that disturbing half-light. A very vague feeling, especially at the age when I could still accompany my mother to the Moorish bath, but which caused me a certain unease.

As soon as we arrived we climbed onto a vast platform covered with mats. After paying seventy-five centimes to the cashier we began our undressing in a tumult of shrill voices, a continuous coming and going of half-dressed women, unpacking from their enormous bundles caftans and mansourias, shirts and trousers, haiks with silk tassels of a dazzling whiteness.

All these women were talking loudly, gesticulating passionately, and screaming inexplicably and unjustifiably.

I took off my clothes and stood there, hands on my stomach, in front of my mother, who was engaged in an explanation with a friend I had met. There were many other children, but they seemed at ease, running between wet thighs, hanging breasts, mountains of bundles, proud to show off their swollen bellies and gray buttocks.

I felt more alone than ever. I was more and more convinced that this was indeed Hell. In the hot rooms, the steamy atmosphere, the nightmare characters that moved about, the temperature, ended up destroying me. I sat down in a corner, trembling with fever and fear. I wondered what all these women were doing, whirling around everywhere, running in all directions, dragging large wooden buckets overflowing with boiling water that splashed me as they passed. Didn't they come to wash themselves? There were one or two of them who were pulling at their hair, sitting with their legs stretched out, protesting in a loud voice, but the others didn't even seem to notice their presence and continued their eternal journeys with their eternal wooden buckets. My mother, caught in the whirlwind, emerged from time to time from a mass of legs and arms, threw me a recommendation or an insult that I could not grasp and disappeared. In front of me, in an empty bucket, there was a horn comb, a well-polished copper goblet, oranges and hard-boiled eggs. I timidly took an orange, peeled it, sucked it for a long time, my gaze vague. I felt less the indecency of my body in this gloom, I watched it cover itself with big drops of sweat and I ended up forgetting the women who were bustling about, their wooden buckets and their inexplicable journeys around the room. My mother fell upon me. She plunged me into a bucket of water, covered my head with a fragrant clay and despite my cries and tears drowned me under a flood of insults and fire. She took me out of the bucket, threw me into a corner like a parcel, and disappeared again into the whirlwind. My despair did not last long; I reached into the bucket of provisions and took out a hard-boiled egg, a delicacy I was particularly fond of. I had not yet finished nibbling on the yolk when my mother reappeared again, doused me alternately with boiling water and ice water, covered me with a towel, and carried me half-dead into the fresh air on the platform with bundles. I heard her say to the cashier:

- Lalla Fattoum, I'm leaving you my son, I haven't had a drop of water to wash myself yet.

And to me:

- Get dressed, onion head! Here's an orange to keep you busy.

I found myself alone, my hands crossed over my burning belly, more stupid than ever in the midst of all these strangers and their sumptuous bundles. I got dressed. My mother came for a moment to wrap a towel tightly around my head, which she tied under my chin, provided me with all sorts of recommendations and rushed into the warm rooms through the door facing me, from which all sorts of rumors escaped.

I waited on the platform until evening. My mother finally came to join me, looking exhausted, complaining of severe headaches.

Fortunately for me, these bathing sessions were quite rare. My mother did not want to bother with the clumsy and awkward child that I was. During her absence, I was given over to my timid fancies. I ran barefoot in the derb, imitating the rhythmic step of the horses, I neighed proudly, kicked. Sometimes, I simply emptied my Box of Wonders on the ground and I inventoried my treasures. A simple porcelain button put my senses into ecstasy. When I had looked at it for a long time, I would caress the material with my fingers with respect. But there was in this object an element that could not be grasped by the eyes or by the fingers, a mysterious untranslatable beauty. It fascinated me. I felt all my inability to fully enjoy it. I almost cried to feel around me this strange invisible, impalpable thing, which I could not taste with my tongue, but which had a taste and the power to intoxicate. And this was embodied in a porcelain button and thus gave it a soul and a talismanic virtue.

In the Box of Wonders there was a crowd of heterogeneous objects that, for me alone, had a meaning: glass balls, copper rings, a tiny padlock without a key, nails with golden heads, empty inkwells, decorated buttons, buttons without decoration. There were some made of transparent material, metal, mother-of-pearl. Each of these objects spoke its language to me. These were my only friends. Of course, I had relations in the world of legend with very valiant princes and tender-hearted giants, but they inhabited the hidden corners of my imagination. As for my glass balls, my buttons and my nails, they were there, at every moment, in their rectangular box, ready to come to my aid in my hours of sorrow.

The day after the bath, my mother did not fail to tell the whole house about the session, with detailed comments full of picturesque features and anecdotes. She mimed the gestures of a certain chérifa known in the neighborhood, the gait of a certain neighbor she did not like, spoke with praise of the cashier or rebelled against the masseuses, these matchmakers, mothers of calamities, who swindled the clients without bringing them the slightest drop of water. The Moorish bath was naturally the place for gossip and gossip. There one met women who did not live in the neighborhood.

We went there as much to purify ourselves as to keep up to date with what was being done, what was being said. It happened that a woman sang a verse and the verse thus made its entrance into the neighborhood. Two or three times, my mother witnessed real catfights. Such scenes provided material for comedy galas. For a week, my mother mimed the argument and its multiple phases in front of the women of the house, the friends passing by and the neighbors. We were treated to a prologue followed by the presentation of the characters, each with their particular silhouette, their physical deformities, the characteristics of their voice, their gestures and their gaze. We saw the drama being born, we saw it develop, reach its climax and end in hugs or tears.

My mother was a great success with the neighbors. I did not like these kinds of exhibitions very much. My mother's excess of gaiety was bound to have unfortunate consequences for me. In the morning, overflowing with enthusiasm, she never failed, in the evening, to find some reason for quarrel or tears. My father always came home late; he rarely found us in a good mood. He almost always suffered the story of an event that my mother liked to paint in the darkest colors. Sometimes an incident of minor importance took on the proportions of a catastrophe.

That was how it was when Rahma had the nefarious idea of doing her laundry on a Monday. It was established that that day belonged exclusively to my mother. Early in the morning, she occupied the patio, cluttering it with wooden troughs, cans that served as washing machines, buckets for rinsing, and bundles of dirty laundry. Barely dressed in a seroual and an old torn caftan, she busied herself around an improvised fire, stirring the contents of the can with a long cane, cursing the wood that gave off more smoke than heat, accusing the black soap merchants of having swindled her, and calling down all sorts of curses on their heads. The patio was not enough for her activity. She climbed up to the terrace, stretched her ropes, supported them with mulberry poles, and came back down to stir up clouds of foam.

That day my mother sent me to school wearing only a shirt under my djellaba. Lunch was a no-go. I had to make do with a slice of bread smeared with rancid butter and three olives. Even our room lost its usual appearance. The mattresses lay there without covers, the cushions no longer had covers, and the window seemed bare without its curtain strewn with red flowers.

The evening was devoted to folding clothes. My mother would take a wrinkled shirt and feeling the sun, spread it out on her knees, looked at it through the transparency, folded it, the sleeves inside, with care, almost with gravity. Sometimes, she would do a darning. She did not like sewing much and I myself preferred to see her pulling on her cards or turning her spinning wheel. The needle, a particularly urban instrument, represented in my eyes a symbol of softness. It was a tradition in our family that the noble feminine profession par excellence consisted of working wool. Handling the needle was almost equivalent to a denial. We were Fassis by accident, but we remained faithful to our mountain origins as peasant lords. My mother never failed to mention these origins during quarrels with the neighbors. She even dared to maintain in front of Rahma that we were authentic descendants of the Prophet.

- There are, she said, papers to prove it, papers carefully guarded by the imam of the mosque of our small town. Who are you, you, wife of a plow maker, of no extraction, to dare to put your linen, full of lice, next to mine freshly washed? I know what you are, a beggar among beggars, a servant among servants, a barefoot, dirty and lousy, a lick of dishes who never eats her fill. And your husband! Tell me about this deformed being, with a beard eaten by moths, who smells of the stable and brays like a donkey! What do you say? Tell your husband? Do I fear your husband? Let him come! I will show him what a woman of noble origin is capable of. As for you, stop your squawking and pick up your clothes. All the neighbors will testify in my favor. You provoked me. I am not a little girl to let myself be insulted by a woman of your kind.

From our second-floor window, pale with anguish and fear, I watched the scene as my Childhood memory recorded the violent sentences.

In the evening, quite dazed with sleep, I heard my father coming up the stairs. He came in as usual, went to his mattress on the floor. My mother prepared supper, set the round table, the dish of stew and the bread. We could feel that she was sulking.

My father began to eat without asking any questions. My mother was still sulking. Then she abruptly raised-ment the voice and said:

- You don't care that we are dragged through the mud, that we are insulted, that our noble origins are insulted, our ancestors who made the tribes tremble! You don't care that people of low extraction try to sully, with improper words, our family which counts among its dead courageous men, leaders, saints and scholars!

Still silent, my father continued to eat.

My mother began again:

- Yes, all this does not bother you. Your wife is subjected to all these insults, your appetite is not affected and you eat as usual. As for me, I have so much pain in my heart that I will never eat again in my life.

My mother, hiding her face in her two hands, gave a long sob and began to cry hot tears. She moaned, lamented, slapped her thighs, sang in a monotonous and sad tune all the misfortunes that had befallen her. She listed the insults she had received, the epithets with which she had been bestowed, and began again inexhaustibly the panegyric of her ancestors who, by the same occasion, found themselves offended.

My father, satisfied, took a sip of water, wiped his mouth, pulled a cushion towards him to lean on and asked:

- Who did you argue with again?

The sentence had a magical effect on my mother. She stopped crying, raised her head and, with an explosion in fury, addressed my father:

- But with the slut from the first floor, the plowmaker's wife! That disgusting creature has soiled my clean linen with her rags that smell of the stable. She never washes usually, she keeps her clothes for three months, but to provoke a quarrel, she chooses Monday, my wash day, to take out her rags. You know my patience, I always try to smooth out difficulties, I never depart from my customary courtesy; I get that from my family, we are all polite. People who provoke us with coarse words are wasting their time. We know how to keep our calm and maintain our dignity. It took that lousy ...

Rahma's voice pierced the night.

- Lousy! Me! Do you hear, people of Muslims?

The day was not enough for him, the men are now in the house and will be able to testify before God which of us has exceeded the limits of propriety.

What happened next cannot be described in words. First there were shrill and prolonged cries, vociferations, sounds without sequence or meaning. Each of the antagonists, leaning out of her window, gesticulated into the void, spat insults that no one understood, tore her hair. Possessed by the demon of dancing, they made strange contortions. Neighbors came out of their rooms and mingled their cries with the cries of the furies. The men, in their deep voices, exhorted them to calm down, insisted that they solemnly curse Satan, but this wise advice excited them more. The noise became intolerable. It was a storm, an earthquake, the unleashing of dark forces, the collapse of the world.

I couldn't take it anymore. My ears were in agony, my heart in my chest was pounding hard against the walls of its cage. The sobs choked me and I collapsed at my mother's feet, unconscious.

Chapter II

TUESDAY, an unlucky day for the students of the MSID, leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. All Tuesdays are the color of ash to me.

It was cold, my night had been filled with nightmares. Disheveled women threatened to gouge out my eyes, hurled the worst insults at my face. Sometimes, one of them threw me through the window and I sank heavily into the void. I screamed. A hand, so gentle, rested on my forehead. In the morning, I went to the Msid as usual. The fqih had his look every Tuesday. His eyes were not permeable to any pity. I took down my clipboard and began to mumble the two or three verses written on it.

At six years old, I was already aware of the hostility of the world and of my fragility. I knew fear, I knew the suffering of the flesh at the touch of the quince stick. My little body shivered in his too-thin clothes. I dreaded the evening devoted to revision. I had to, according to custom, recite the few chapters of the Koran that I had learned since my entrance to school.

At lunch time, the master signaled me to leave. I hung up my board. I put on my slippers waiting for me at the door of the Msid and I crossed the street. My mother received me rather coldly. She was suffering from a terrible migraine. To stop the illness, she had his temples lined with rounds of paper copiously coated with flour glue. Lunch was improvised and the kettle on its brazier timidly began its song. Lalla Aïcha, a former neighbor, came to visit us. My mother received her by complaining about her both physical and moral ailments. She affected a weak convalescent voice, lay on the suffering from a certain part of his body, violently squeezed his head wrapped in a scarf with both hands. Lalla Aïsha gave him all sorts of advice, pointed out a fqih in a distant neighborhood, whose talismans worked miracles. I stood shy and silent in my corner. The visitor noticed the paleness of my face.

- What's wrong with your son? she asked.

And my mother replied:

- The eyes of the world are so evil, the gaze of the envious has extinguished the brilliance of this face which evoked a bouquet of roses. Do you remember her cheeks that sweated carmine? and her eyes with long lashes, black as the wings of the raven? God is my agent, his vengeance will be terrible.

- I can give you some advice; said Lalla Aïcha: let us all three go up this afternoon to Sidi Ali Boughaleb. This child will not be able to bear the Msid; if you made him drink water from the sanctuary, he would regain his cheerfulness and strength. My mother was still hesitant. To convince her, Lalla Aïcha spoke at length about her joint pains, her legs that no longer obeyed her, her hands that were heavy as lead, the difficulty she had in turning over in her bed and the sleepless nights she had spent moaning like Job on his pallet. Thanks to Sidi Ali Boughaleb, patron saint of doctors and barbers, her pains disappeared.

- Lalla Zoubida, it is God who sent me to help you, to show you the way to healing, I love you, you and your son, I will never find the taste for food or drink again if I abandon you to your suffering. My mother promised to visit Sidi Ali Bou-ghaleb and to take me there that very afternoon. Lalla Aïcha sighed with satisfaction.

The two women continued to chat for a long time. My mother went up to the terrace and came back down with an armful of aromatic plants that she grew in chipped pots and old enamel pots.

She flavored her tea with verbena and sage, offered to

Lalla Aïcha a small branch of absinthe to put in her glass. She politely refused, declaring that this tea was already a real spring. I put all sorts of aromatic plants in my glass. I let them macerate for a long time. My tea became bitter, but I knew that this drink relieved my frequent colic.

My mother got up to get ready. She changed her shirt and mansouria, searched the bottom of the trunk for an old embroidered belt in faded green, found a piece of white cotton that served as a veil, and wrapped herself with dignity in her freshly washed haik.

It was, indeed, a great day. I was given my white djellaba and had to leave my everyday one, a gray djellaba, an indefinable gray, dotted with ink stains and grease circles. Lalla Aïcha had all sorts of difficulty tearing herself away from the mattress where she lay.

I have a vivid memory of this woman, wider than she was tall, with a head that rested directly on her torso, short arms that were constantly waving. Her smooth, round face inspired a certain disgust in me. I didn't like it when she kissed me. When she came to our house, my mother forced me to kiss her hand because she was a chérifa, daughter of the Prophet, because she had known fortune and had remained dignified despite the setbacks of fate. A relationship like Lalla Aïcha flattered my mother's pride.

Finally, everyone went up the stairs. We soon found ourselves in the street. The two women walked with tiny steps, sometimes leaning over each other to communicate their impressions in a whisper. At home, they made the walls tremble by recounting the slightest trivialities, so much were their vocal cords at all costs; in the street, they became aphonic and gently mincing.

Sometimes I would get ahead of them, but they would catch up with me every three steps to give me advice on caution and recommendations. I was not to rub against the walls: the walls were so dirty and I had my superb white djellaba, I had to blow my nose often with the beautiful embroidered handkerchief hanging from my neck, I also had to stay away from the donkeys, never be behind them because they could kick and never in front because they took a malicious pleasure in biting small children.

- Give me your hand, my mother said to me.

And five steps later:

- Go ahead, your hand is all sweaty. I regained my freedom but for a very short time. Lalla Aïcha offered to guide me through the crowd. She walked slowly and held a lot of volume.

A traffic jam soon formed. Passers-by threw all sorts of unpleasant remarks at us but eventually came to our aid. Unfamiliar arms lifted me off the ground, made me pass over heads and I finally found myself in a free space. I waited a long time before seeing the two immaculate haiks emerge from the crowd. The scene repeated itself several times during this trip. We crossed streets without any particular name or face. I was attentive to the advice

of my two guides, I applied myself to parking the donkeys, inevitably tripping over the knees of passers-by. Each time I avoided an obstacle, another presented itself. We finally arrived at the cemetery which extends on the outskirts of Sidi Ali Boughaleb. I sketched a timid step of joy.

The marigold-covered graves glowed in the sun. Here and there merchants stood enthroned behind their pyramids of oranges. One could hear the drumbeat of a popular singer and the bell of the water merchant. In the small square, country folk sold wood for washing, terracotta braziers, and dishes for cooking pancakes. The stalls of the candy merchants caught my eye. On display were roosters and chicks made of yellow sugar decorated with pink threads, transparent teapots, tiny slippers, and bellows. These magnificent objects reminded me of my Box of Wonders. My father had given me some sometimes, but before they reached home, they crumbled or simply became gray and dusty, unworthy of being among my treasures. They were beautiful, there, in the sun, in the hum of the crowd.

The green tiled roof that covers the mausoleum stood out against a soft azure sky where whimsically shaped white and pink clouds frolicked. On the steps of the main entrance, women sat on the ground, chatting among themselves, chewing scented gum under their veils, calling out to their children who were playing in the dust. They squeezed together to leave us a narrow passage.

We soon found ourselves in a courtyard that seemed immense to me. In the center stood four terracotta vessels filled with water. My mother found a goblet and made me drink. She poured a little liquid into the palm of her hand, ran her fingers over my face, eyes, knuckles, and ankles. While performing this ritual, she mumbled vague prayers and invocations, advised me to remain calm, reminded Lalla Aïcha of this or that incident during our walk. I endured all this with my customary patience. I craned my neck to watch an army of cats engaging in a mad saraband inside this strange temple. Beyond this courtyard opened the Zaouia. On each side of a square room where the Saint's catafalque stood, two doors led to the pilgrims' rooms. People who came from far away to get rid of their ailments lived there with their children, waiting for healing.

Arriving in front of the catafalque, Lalla Aïcha and mother began to call loudly to the saint for their help. One ignoring the words of the other, each exposed her little miseries, struck the wood of the catafalque with the flat of her hand, moaned, begged, vituperated against her enemies. The voices rose, the hands struck the wood of the catafalque with more energy and passion. A sacred delirium had taken hold of the two women. They listed their ills, exposed their weaknesses, asked for protection, demanded vengeance, confessed impurities, proclaimed the mercy of God and the power of Sidi Ali Boughaleb, appealed to his pity. Exhausted by their fervor, they finally stopped. The guardian of the mausoleum came to compliment them on their piety and join her prayers to theirs.

- Your wishes will be granted and your desires fulfilled, she said in conclusion. God is generous, he relieves suffering and heals all wounds. His goodness extends to all creatures. Is it not a sign of His Goodness to have sent us Prophets to divert from the path of evil and show us the way to Paradise? It is an effect of his generosity to have revealed to us through Our Lord Mohammed (salvation and peace be upon him) his highly venerated Word which teaches us the capital virtues: charity, love of parents, goodness towards all creatures. Those who have practiced these virtues in all their integrity become the Friends of God and intercede on our behalf. Sidi Ali Boughaleb is among the most worthy. He loved all beings and was particularly fond of cats. We currently have more than fifty of them. They are brought to us sick, mangy and skinny. It takes a short time for them to regain health and joy. To please the Holy One, we must feed and care for them.

My mother rummaged through her clothes. She quickly took out a handkerchief with a big knot. Slowly, she untied it, using her incisors several times. Lalla Aïcha whispered a mysterious sentence in her ear, my mother nodded and offered the Moqadma two one-franc coins accompanied by this explanation:

- Here is for me and for the chérifa who accompanies me.

The guardian opened her two hands, received the gift and began a long prayer. Women arrived from outside and joined our small group to benefit from this moment of grace, to enjoy this spiritual dew that refreshes hearts.

Slowly, I slipped out of this swarm of women to go and pet a big tomcat sprawled out against the wall. He looked at me with his yellow eyes, purred and gave me a masterful swipe of his claw. Blood spurted. My hand began to sting horribly. I screamed. My mother rushed over, mad with worry, jostling her neighbors, tripping over her haik which was dragging on the ground.

The wound hurt and I screamed non-stop. The women asked questions, felt sorry for me, offered me an orange to console me, called me their little rose, their bouquet of jasmine, their little fromage blanc. Far from calming me down, this whirlwind of faces made me dizzy. I sobbed until my soul was breaking. A wet hand rested on my face, a cloth dried my tears and the runny nose. The cold of that hand calmed my tears, but I didn't stop hiccuping all the way back.

My mother put me to bed as soon as I got home.

My father was always the first to get up. I could vaguely see his silhouette dancing slowly in the half-light. He wrapped a rope several cubits long made of goat hair around his waist, which he used as a belt. To do this, he turned around, lifted one leg to let the rope pass through, lifted the other alternately, and made broad gestures with his arms. He then proceeded to arrange his turban, put on his djellaba and went out in silence. My mother was asleep.

This morning I heard my father whisper to him:

- Don't send him to the Msid, he seems very tired. My mother nodded and went back into her blankets. The whole house was still asleep.

Two sparrows came to perch on the wall of the patio, I could hear them hopping from one place to another, beating the air with their short wings. They were arguing passionately and I understood their language. It was a passionate dialogue: they affirmed this with conviction:

- I like dried figs.

- Why do you like dried figs?

- Everyone loves dried figs.

- Yes! Yes! Yes!

- Everyone loves dried figs.

Dried figs! Dried figs! Dried figs!

Their wings rustled and the two sparrows left to continue their conversation on other roofs. I understood the language of birds and many other animals, but they did not know it and fled when I approached. I felt great pain.

Buckets clanked together in the patio. The chouafa was the first to rise, and that was a good thing! The shadows of the night still lingered at this hour around the fountain and the well, in the toilets and in the immense storeroom where each tenant took turns washing.

The chouafa knew the effective words that made these shadows harmless. Every Thursday evening, she burned aromatics, sprinkled the corners with milk or odoriferous waters, and pronounced long incantations.

A door slammed. Rahma's daughter Zineb began to whine. Her mother gave her a resounding slap and drowned her in a flood of insults.

- At your age! Aren't you ashamed of wetting your bed almost every night? I should let you loose in a stable, instead of preparing your mattress every night.

The chouafa interrupted him:

- May your morning be happy, Rahma!

- Have a sunny day, Lalla!

- How do you feel this morning?

- I thank the Lord, he inflicted a terrible punishment on me the day he gave me this ill-omened piss. I thank him for his innumerable gifts, I thank him in joy as in affliction.

- Let all cause for sorrow be removed from you. Be patient! This child will recover, she will be your consolation in this world of misery,

- God hears you, Lalla! May he pour out his blessings without measure on you, on those who are dear to you.

My mother stirred in her bed, coughed, sighed, and finally sat up. She got up and opened the window. The light splashed in my eyes and hurt. I heard Fatma Bziouya's shutters open.

In a sleepy voice, my mother unrolled her usual string of greetings that she addressed every morning to her neighbor across the street. She wished her a happy day with the usual formulas.

Neither listened to what the other was saying. Each recited his spiel in a monotonous tone without ardor or enthusiasm. They asked questions but knew the answers in advance. For the three years that we had lived together, they had repeated the same sentences every morning. Sometimes they modified a word, alluded to some recent event, but such circumstances were very rare.

Invariably, my mother would ask:

- How do you feel this morning? Doesn't your head hurt too much? Was your sleep peaceful?

She concluded:

- Health is of the utmost importance, my sister! Nothing can replace it.

That day she added:

- My boy is not well today. God keep evil away from you and your loved ones, and die eyes to those who envy us.

The voice of the chouafa rose from the ground floor:

- Lalla Zoubida! May your morning be blessed! God remove from you all cause for pain and preserve you, you and yours, in excellent health!

My mother replied:

- May your day be bright and full of blessings! How are you feeling this morning? God will watch over your happiness and that of all those close to you.

The chouafa continued:

- Do not worry about your son, the friends of God watch over his health. He has protectors in the visible world and in the invisible world. I know that he is cherished by the beneficial powers. When he is

man, he will be a sword among swords, an invulnerable warrior, a hive of honey sought after for its flavor and its fragrance.

- Lalla, said my mother, all moved, honey and butter flow from your mouth and the smell of Paradise perfume smoke your breath.

And my mother, ecstatic, her eyes to heaven, added:

- Lord, who listens to me from the heights of heaven, pour out your inexhaustible treasures, O you master of all treasures, on this good woman; may she be venerated as she deserves in this world and may she benefit from your generosity in the Hereafter. May her life be crowned by the accomplishment of the pilgrimage to the Places that are dear to us, your slaves to whom you revealed the Truth through your Prophet (peace be upon him, his companions and his relatives, peace and blessings be upon him!) Ameen! O God of the Universe!

- Amine! All the women echoed. During this ceremony, I got up and put on my djellaba.

My ears were ringing a little, but I felt no more tired than usual. The prospect of staying at home all day, away from the fqih and his quince wand, made me very happy. It was Wednesday, the following day was usually a day off, and on Friday the school did not open until after the noon prayer. I had two and a half days ahead of me, two and a half days to live like a prince.

My mother helped me with my ablutions and busied herself in the small space that served as her kitchen, lighting the fire. The whole house echoed with the sound of bellows. The sun was shining brightly. Soon the table was set. There were eggs fried in olive oil and fresh bread. We began to eat. Allal, Fatma Bziouya's husband, a gardener by trade, made his voice heard at the entrance to the house.

- Is there no one? May I come? Rahma replied:

- There's no one here. Come on!

His footsteps echoed on the stairs. We were finishing eating when his wife entered our room. She was holding an earthenware plate on which lay two sfenj doughnuts. I was particularly fond of them. My mother stood up to receive the visitor. With a bored face and a pursed mouth, she rattled off the phrases that politeness demands on such occasions.

- Fatma! Why did you bother? I can't accept! We have, praise be to God, more than enough to satisfy us! Two donuts! That's way too much! By God I can't accept.

Our neighbor tried to overcome this resistance. She took my mother's hand and protested warmly.

- You cannot do me such an affront. Give it to Sidi Mohammed; may Allah grant him health! You cannot refuse, it is such a small thing!

Finally, my mother thanked me.

- God will fill you with His blessings, and make you taste the foods of Paradise that He reserves for His chosen ones.

- God will open for us all the doors of his treasures.

Fatma went to join her husband and my mother pushed the plate with the two donuts towards me.

- Eat them, you who love them, she said to me; my stomach can't stand donuts.

I enjoyed myself.

An apprentice of my father, whom everyone called Driss the Snarling, knocked at the front door. He asked for a basket to do our shopping. My mother loudly recommended that he choose meat without too many bones, and very tender green beans. My father's situation was quite

prosperous. We could afford to eat meat three to four times a week.

Dad, of mountain origin like my mother, after leaving his village located about fifty kilometers from the big city, had at first experienced difficulties in earning a living for himself and his young wife. In his country, one was a pillager and a peasant. In Fez, to live one had to exercise some urban industry or set up a small business. In our family, selling and buying has always been considered the most vile profession.

My father remembered being at one point in his youth in the workshop of one of his maternal uncles, a blanket weaver. So he bought a minimum of equipment, rented a corner in a workshop and set up as a weaver. He did his work honestly, improving his production day by day.

Soon his articles were much disputed, and the household enjoyed a certain comfort. My father had an old workman with him on the loom; Driss the scruffy filled the cans and ran errands.

Driss came home twice a day: in the morning to buy groceries and in the middle of the day to get his boss's lunch. My father ate at the workshop. He only came in the evening after the last prayer. Friday was an exception. On that day my father was at his job until around noon; he paid his employees, went to the Mosque for the main prayer and we had lunch as a family.

Driss came back laden with his heavy basket. My mother took inventory of it. The stingy fellow had forgotten nothing. The meat looked good and the green of the bean pods made one salivate abundantly. The basket contained, in addition to garlic, parsley and a quantity of small packets of spices. We had oil, coal and flour for the whole month.

When my mother spoke of "the eye of the envious", she surely had in mind these riches. The less fortunate neighbours were a little jealous of us. Moreover, they were not unaware of any detail of our domestic life. My mother, for her part, knew everyone's difficulties, the state of each household's finances, the debts they incurred, their daily expenses and the quality of their daily fare.

The beans were poured into a large, dish-shaped esparto basket.

- You will help me shell them, mother told me. I agreed and immediately set to work. I quickly grew disgusted with this work. I went to take a peek into Bziouya's room. She was rolling couscous. In a corner, various vegetables were piled up: turnips, carrots, red squash and onions. Our neighbor was very fond of me. She left her couscous for a moment to rummage in a basket. She handed me, with a broad smile, a ruby-red radish a span long. I smiled at her to thank her and sank my teeth into the pink flesh of this delicacy. The taste was so strong that tears came to my eyes. I said nothing, I went backwards, climbed the steps that led to the terrace and threw the beautiful radish over the wall that separated us from another house.

The sun was bright and warm. A black and white cat was resting on the wall and following my movements with its half-closed eyes. I did not approach it. The scratch of the cat in Sidi Ali Boughaleb's boarding school had taught me to be wary of cats that purr in the sun.

My mother was already worried about my absence, she called me to the crowd. I started down the stairs to go back down. Someone was coming up barefoot. The soft steps and rustling of clothes were getting closer. Rahma appeared. My mother had not spoken to her since their argument. The two women avoided meeting each other, I did not know whether to smile at her or run away. I pressed myself against the wall and waited for events to decide for me. When she reached me, Rahma stopped, stroked my cheek and slipped an object into my hand, a smooth and cold object, but the touch of which plunged me into a bath of delight.

- It's for you, our neighbor whispered to me.

I didn't answer and ran to join my mother who was getting impatient.

The object was still in the palm of my hand and gave off the freshness of spring water. Settled in a corner of the room, I finally dared to look at it. It was a large faceted glass cabochon cut into a diamond, a fabulous and barbaric jewel, undoubtedly coming from some underground palace where the powers of the Invisible dwell.

Was it a message from those distant kingdoms? Was it a talisman? Was it a cursed stone given to me by our enemy to draw upon the wrath of the demons? What did I care about the wrath of all the demons on earth!

I held in my hands an object of unsuspected richness.

It will take its place in my Box of Wonders and I will discover all its virtues.
My mother found me in my corner. She gave me a careless look and said:

- Another piece of glass! Be careful not to hurt yourself.

Chapter III

These two and a half days of rest passed very quickly. On Friday after lunch, I found myself at school, shouting verses from the Quran and pounding the words on my clipboard with my fists.

A lock of hair adorned the right side of my head. It twirled in the four winds while I frantically learned my lesson. My fingers ached from banging on my wooden board. Each student was engaged in this game with passion. The master was dozing, his long wand in his hand. The noise, the repeated blows on the boards intoxicated me. My cheeks were hot. My temples were buzzing. A patch of anemic yellow sunlight still lingered on the wall opposite. The master woke up, gave a few blows with his wand and fell asleep again.

The sun spot was diminishing.

The children's cries had turned into a torrent, a cataract of gusts.

The sun spot disappeared.

The master opened his eyes, yawned, distinguished among all these voices the one that was distorting a venerated sentence, corrected the faulty word and looked for a comfortable position to resume his sleep. But he noticed that the sun had disappeared. He rubbed his eyes, his face lit up and the stick signaled us to come closer. The noise stopped abruptly. All seated against the platform of the fqih, we sang the first surah of the Koran. The youngest as well as the oldest knew it. We never left school in the evening without singing it. On Fridays we followed it with a few verses from Bnou Achir devoted to the ritual of ablutions and one or two prayers to implore the mercy of God in favor of our parents and our teachers dead and alive.

We were happy when these litanies began. They meant the end of our suffering, the return home, the running through the damp alleys. Finally, the master freed us one by one. Before leaving we went to the platform to greet him one last time and kiss his hand.

Everyone took their slippers from a shelf placed at the entrance to the schoolroom and left. It was already dark when I arrived home.

While waiting for my father to return, I ate a piece of dry bread, took out my Box of Wonders and immersed myself in the contemplation of my riches. The glass cabochon still fascinated me; I never stopped touching it, looking at it through its transparency, holding it tenderly against my cheek.

My mother lit a huge candle stuck in a copper candlestick.

Tonight, Fatma Bziouya's room shone with an unusual brightness. My mother noticed it. Without leaving her place, she called out to our neighbor:

- Fatma! Are you celebrating a wedding? Why are you burning several candles? ...What are you saying? One lamp! Wait, I'm coming.

My mother got up and walked to the opposite room. I followed her.

Oh! Wonder! In the center of the wall, a kerosene lamp was hung. A white and peaceful flame danced imperceptibly in a glass shaped like a clarinet. A mirror, placed behind it, intensified the light. We were, my mother and I, completely dazzled. My mother finally said:

- Your lamp lights up well. But isn't there a danger of explosion? A risk of fire? We also say that oil smells very bad.

Bziouya ventured timidly:

- I don't think there is any danger. Several people in the neighborhood are now using these lamps. They seem very happy with it. You should buy one, it makes the room look more welcoming and cheerful.
- Yes, my mother replied, pursed her lips, a lamp certainly gives better light than a candle, but it is less pretty than a copper candlestick.

My curiosity subsided. She took my hand and led me back to our house. She said nothing more until Papa arrived. She prepared dinner as usual, set the small round table, and gathered the tea utensils within reach.

As my father crossed the threshold of the room, I rushed to greet him. His face became radiant. He reached down, grabbed me under the armpits and lifted me up to his face.

- He's getting heavy, this infidel! He's almost a man!

- No, I said to him, I will be a man when I have a beautiful beard. In the watermelon season, I rub my cheeks with their juice, no hair grows on me.

- Try again next season, my father told me, maybe you will get some results? You then you will have a beautiful black beard.

- You, dad, you have two white hairs in your beard. I see you're getting old.

- No, my father told me, no, it's just a desire. It's better to have a drop of milk in your beard hairs than a fig or a bunch of grapes on the tip of the nose.

This remark provoked great bursts of laughter from me.

Dinner was delicious, with my favourite dish of all: sheep's feet with chickpeas. We ate heartily. The table cleared, my mother served us mint tea and talked about the minor events of the day. My father sipped his tea and rarely answered. The light dimmed for a second, my mother snuffed out the candle with a pair of rusty scissors. She took the opportunity to declare that the candles were becoming of inferior quality, that one was needed every three days and that the room seemed gloomy with all these shadows gathering in the corners.

- All "good" people light their homes with oil, she said in conclusion.

These words left my father in total indifference. My eyes shone with curiosity. I waited for his verdict. I inwardly admired my mother's skill. I was disappointed. Without comment, my father prepared for bed. I went to bed. I dreamed that night of a beautiful white flame that I managed to keep prisoner in my diamond-cut glass cabochon.

The next day, when I returned from the Msid for lunch, I jumped for joy and surprise when I discovered, hanging on the wall of our room, right in the center, an oil lamp identical to that of our neighbor.

In the morning, Driss the grumpy one, when he came to get the basket for the provisions, had handed it to my mother. He had also bought a bottle of oil and a funnel.

The chouafa who was called "Aunt Kanza" came up to admire our new acquisition, wished us all kinds of prosperity. My mother was beaming with happiness. She must have found life worth living and the world populated by beings of infinite goodness. She sang, tenderly scolded a skinny cat, a stranger in the house, laughed at nothing.

In my mother's case, such joys were often very close to tears. The opportunity did not take long to present itself that day; she was able, as she said, "to relieve her heart."

Rahma, the wife of the plowmaker, who had gone out this morning with her daughter Zineb, intending to go to the Kalklyine district to attend a baptism, returned in tears. She began to lament from the entrance of the house, to administer loud slaps on her cheeks.

- Woe! Woe is me! I am the most miserable of mothers; I will never be able to survive this pain. No one can ease my pain.

Questions came pouring out of all the windows. The women had stopped their work. They were begging her to tell them about the nature of this catastrophe that had struck her. My mother forgot that Rahma was only a slob, a beggar among beggars. All moved, she rushed to the first floor, shouting:

- My sister! My poor sister! What happened to you?

- Maybe we can help you. Stop crying, you're breaking our hearts.

All the women surrounded the unfortunate Rahma. She finally managed to inform them: Zi-neb had disappeared, lost in the crowd. In vain, her mother had tried to find her in the small side streets, Zineb had vanished, the ground had swallowed her up and there was not the slightest trace of her left.

The news of this disappearance spread instantly in the neighborhood. Unknown women crossed the terraces to come and share Rahma's pain and exhort her to patience. Everyone began to cry loudly. Each of the assistants moaned, lamented, recalled the particularly painful moments of her life, and was moved by her own fate.

I had joined the group of mourners and burst into tears. No one was paying attention to me. I did not like Zineb, her disappearance rather pleased me, I was crying for many other reasons. First, I was crying to do as everyone else was doing, it seemed to me that propriety demanded it; I was also crying because my mother was crying and because Rahma, who had given me a beautiful glass cabochon as a gift, was sad; but the deeper reason perhaps was the one I gave to my mother when she stopped, exhausted.

All the women stopped, wiping their faces, some with a handkerchief, some with the bottom of their shirts. I continued to cry for a long time. They tried to comfort me. My mother said to me:

- Stop! Sidi Mohammed, we will find Zineb, stop! You will hurt your eyes with all these tears. Hiccuping, I answered him:

- I don't care if we don't find Zineb, I'm crying because I'm hungry!

My mother grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me away, angrily.

I had lunch alone and went to school. The afternoon passed for me like any other afternoon: I shouted the sacred verses, banged on my board. In the evening, after reciting my lesson, I returned to the house. I expected to find it upside down. It was not so. Silently, the women blew their fire, stirred their stews, crushed their spices in copper mortars. I did not dare ask my mother about Zineb's adventures.

My father arrived, as usual, after the Aacha prayer. The meal was simple, but at tea time, mother talked about the events of the day. She began:

- Poor Rahma spent a day in the throes of anguish. We were all devastated.

- What happened? my father asked.

My mother continued:

- Do you know Allal the baker who lives in Kalklyine? Yes, yes, you must know him. He is married to Khadija, the sister of our neighbor Rahma. A year ago, they came to spend a week here with their parents; they are honest, pious and well-bred people. Married for three years, they very much wanted to have a child. Poor Khadija consulted healers, fqih, sorcerers and choua-fas without result. A year ago, they went on a pilgrimage to Sidi Ali Bou Serghine. Khadija bathed in the spring, promised the saint to sacrifice a lamb if God granted her wish. She had her baby.

For six days now, the joy of the household has been at its height. Tomorrow we will proceed to the sacrifice of the Name. My father dared to point out that he did not see in this event any cause for anxiety. But my mother interrupted him and declared that he was incapable of listening to a story from start to finish.

- Wait! Wait! she said, I'm just getting started, you keep interrupting me.

Rahma was therefore invited to the baptism and the Name ceremony. Her husband bought her a beautiful dress dotted with multicoloured flowers. She took out her wedding scarf, the beautiful red scarf decorated with birds, dressed her daughter Zineb in new clothes and they left early this morning. They passed through Mech-chatine, Seffarine, El Ouadine ...

- You're not going to name all the streets of Fez, my father said simply.

I giggled. Stern eyes fixed on me for a moment and my mother continued:

- They arrived at Rsif. The crowd blocked the way. A merchant was selling fresh fish, one franc seventy-five per *Rtal*, (in Joutyia, fish sell for two francs twenty-five). People were fighting to be served. Rahma and her daughter were caught in the turmoil of this tumult. Once in the open air, Rahma adjusted her haik and noticed that Zineb had disappeared! She called, shouted, roused the crowd. The merchant stopped his dealings, people came to the aid of the afflicted mother, but the daughter was nowhere to be found.

Rahma came back in tears, we consoled her as best we could. Allal the gardener hurried to warn Rahma's husband. Two town criers went all over the town, giving the girl's description, promising a reward to whoever would bring her back to her parents.

Meanwhile, we weak women could only cry, offer our compassion to the unhappy mother.

My heart was heavy. Fatma Bziouya and I left for Moulay Idriss. In such circumstances, one must knock at the door of God and his Saints. This door always gives way to the afflicted.

An old woman surprised our pain, she asked us the reason. We informed her of the sad event. She took us by the hand and led us to Dar Kitoun, the house of the Idrissides, a place of asylum for all the abandoned. There, we found Zineb. The *moqqadama* had taken her in and fed her for the love of the Creator. She had a rial reward and we thanked her for her good care.

Rahma regained all her cheerfulness when her daughter was returned to her.

- Praise be to God! finished my father. Prepare the bed for this child, he added. He is falling asleep.

Under my covers, with my eyes open, I imagined in a sweet drowsiness the house of the Idris-sides. I pictured a vast dwelling with faded mosaics, buzzing like a hive with the voices of women awaiting repudiation, of unhappy young girls and lost children.

I too was lost in a deserted city, searching in vain for a place of refuge. I felt my solitude becoming heavy enough to suffocate me. I cried out. A gentle word came from afar to calm my fever and I fell into the dark, reassured, relaxed, my breath calm.

The following Thursday, Rahma, to thank God for giving her back her daughter, organized a meal for the poor. All the women of the house lent her their help. Lalla kanza, the *chouafa*, helped by Fa-touma, the most devoted and faithful of her disciples, washed the ground floor with plenty of water, spread out worn mats and rugs on the floor. Fatma Bziouya, Rahma and my mother busied themselves around the pots and couscoussiers. They cooked outdoors on the terrace, on wood fires. One of them refilled them with water, another peeled the vegetables and the third, armed with a gigantic wooden ladle, stirred the sauces that were bubbling in their copper containers.

Zineb and I, abandoned to our whims, ran from one room to another, went up the stairs blowing, received clouds of smoke in our eyes, accompanied by reprimands, went back down to take refuge on the landing, not knowing what to do with our freedom. We waited impatiently for lunch time and the arrival of the beggars.

When the large ceramic dishes that Rahma had rented were filled with couscous copiously basted with broth, topped with a pyramid of meat and vegetables, Driss El Aouad left for Moulay Idriss and the blind people's home on Rue Riad Jaha, to look for his guests. Soon we heard in the entrance corridor, a hubbub punctuated by blows of canes and raised voices. Driss entered the patio first. He was followed by a blind man with a white beard guided by a boy of about ten years old.

Then a stream of beggars, men and women, poured into the courtyard. The first old man exercised a veritable royalty over this ragged crowd. All obeyed him. They showed great respect for this patriarch.

So I had before my eyes the chief of the beggars in the midst of his clan.

Everyone sat on the mats and worn carpets. Before the meal was served to them, they sang a psalm in which they spoke of the felicity that awaits the believers with generous hearts, those who feed the hungry, who honor the guest of God. The poem ended with invocations, in order to attract blessings on our home and on all its inhabitants. Men, women and children joined their hands, palms open towards the sky. They recited the first surah of the Koran. I knew this surah well and I recited it with fervor:

Praise be to God

Master of the worlds.

We rubbed our corn on our faces. The couscous appeared. Around the plates placed on the mats, the beggars sat down to eat. Earthenware bowls, decorated with tar, were passed around, full of water. The beggars ate and drank with dignity, without haste, without agitation. Satiated, they licked their fingers carefully, dried themselves with cloths placed at their disposal.

At the signal of their leader, they began the psalmody of a chapter of the Holy Book. The walls of our house, which had often echoed the sound of the rattlesnakes and sandgrouse *dear* to the *chouafa*, vibrated, sanctified by the sacred verses. The chosen chapter was particularly long. It was sung to a rhythm full of majesty. The blind men in their rags, proclaiming with conviction the word of God, took on a nobility and grandeur that struck the imagination.

After a final invocation pronounced by the patriarch of the blind and punctuated by the word *amine* by the chorus of the assistants, the assembly rose, the canes rang on our extinguished mosaics.

The beggars left, multiplying their thanks and their formulas of blessing.

Rahma, radiant, invited the neighbors and some women from the adjoining houses, gathered them in her room, served them an excellent meat stew with cardoons, chickpea couscous, orange salads with sugar and cinnamon. Mom prepared mint tea. They were all chattering, laughing very loudly, teasing each other, shouting you-you.

Before gathering for the meal, my mother and the other neighbors had changed their dresses. They took from their chests brightly colored *caftans* , flower-adorned *dfinas* , and rich silk scarves to wear on their heads. The party lasted until sunset. It ended on the terrace with more you-yous, more good wishes, and the promise to see each other.

During all this time no one had taken care of me. I had eaten with Zineb in a small dish that was personal to me and that my father had given me, the day before the sheep festival. We had managed to get some tea that we had transferred into a tin teapot, Zineb's toy and to finish we had fought.

At night, the house fell silent again. I felt myself. I took out my Box, emptied it on a corner of the mattress, looked at my objects one by one. Tonight, they did not speak to me. They lay inert, sullen, a little hostile. They had lost their magic power and were becoming suspicious, secretive. I put them back in their box. Once the lid was closed, they woke up in the dark to indulge in lavish and delicate games without my knowledge. They did not know in their ignorance that the walls of my Box of Wonders could not withstand my contemplation. My innocent glass cabochon grew, expanded, reached the proportions of a dream palace, and was adorned with precious fabrics. Nails, porcelain buttons, pins and pearls changed into princesses, slaves, young men, entered this palace, played sweet melodies, fed on refined dishes, organized swing sessions, flew into the trees to bite into the fruits, disappeared into the sky on the wing of the wind in search of adventure.

I opened the Box with infinite precautions in order to enjoy the spectacle more intensely. The enchantment disappeared, I found simply a glass cabochon, buttons and nails without soul and without mystery. This observation was cruel. I burst into tears. My mother came, spoke of fatigue, took me to sleep.

Chapter IV

In the first days of spring, my mother and I went to visit Lalla Aïcha. We were invited to spend the day. A few days before, my mother prepared cakes of fine semolina, small breads with anise and sugar, sellou, toasted flour mixed with butter and various spices.

We took all these delicacies with us. We left the house in the morning; Driss the naughty one came to find us at my mother's friend's house laden with his basket of provisions and a very good-looking chicken. Driss also brought a loaf of sugar, a packet of tea and an armful of mint.

Lalla Aïcha protested, reproaching my mother for these crazy expenses. She was expecting our visit; she had makes its market accordingly.

Lalla Aïcha lived in the dead end of Zankat Hajjama in a house with a low door. This house reminded us, in some ways, of Lalla Aïcha herself. Both had known better times, both retained a stiff attitude, an outdated distinction.

Lalla Aïcha occupied two small rooms on the second floor. A balcony overlooking the patio, decorated with a wrought iron balustrade, led to the main room. The other room opened directly onto the staircase and was mainly used to store winter provisions. Lalla Aïcha also did her cooking there. The large room had two windows, one opening onto the patio of the house, the other onto the terraces of neighboring houses and onto the roofs of a small neighborhood mosque. This room, twice as long as it was wide, was meticulously clean. Cretonnes with large patterns covered the mattresses, enormous cushions embroidered with petit point, wrapped in a light transparent silk, were piled up here and there. The wall was adorned with large painted shelves, filled with European earthenware bowls, plates decorated with plump roses, and goblet-shaped glasses. A dark wooden clock, rich in carving, pinnacles, and pendants, occupied the place of honor on the wall. The floor was covered with a rush mat. Over the mat was a brightly colored rug.

This whole place was bathed in an atmosphere of ease and tranquility. It was certainly not the height of luxury. but comfort, a cozy nest sheltered from the wind.

As soon as we arrived, Lalla Aïcha served us cakes and mint tea. She then talked about her joint pains that were teasing her again, about a toothache that had driven her crazy last week, about her lack of appetite. She asked a thousand questions to my mother who answered with complacency, lingered over a detail, launched into a long digression, mimed a scene. Our neighbors naturally bore the brunt of the party. My mother spoke about it without malice but with a fair amount of freedom of language. She compared Rahma's husband to a donkey that had eaten too much bran, Fatma Bziouya's to a worried rat. My father, whom she called "the Man," did not escape her claws. His tall stature, his strength, his silence became motives for caricature. I loved my father. I found him very handsome. The slightly golden white skin, the black beard, the coral red lips, the deep and serene eyes, everything about him pleased me. My father, it is true, spoke little and prayed a lot, but my mother spoke too much and did not pray enough. She was certainly more amusing, more cheerful. Her mobile eyes reflected a child's soul. Despite her ivory complexion, her generous mouth, her short and well-shaped nose, she did not pride herself on any coquetry. She strove to appear older than her age. At twenty-two, she behaved like a matron matured by experience.

Lalla Aïcha spoke to us in turn about the people in her house. She proclaimed their many merits, such a modest and pretty one, such another clean, thrifty and a good cook, such another pious and worthy; to hear her, they all rivaled in holiness the angels of Paradise. But she lowered her voice to whisper in my mother's ear her real thought. She ended with these words:

- God blessed me when he inspired me with the idea of living in this house where all the women live like sisters.

Voices rose from the ground floor, came out of all the rooms to thank Lalla Aïcha for her kind words. In chorus Lalla Aïcha and my mother generously distributed new compliments.

The children of the house came to invite me to play. They formed a small group of four boys and three girls. I never learned their names. The eldest, a nine-year-old girl, took me under her wing. We climbed up onto the terrace. With old blankets and sheepskins, we quickly set up a reception room.

A rusty tin can placed on three stones played the role of a samovar, other stones placed on a paper disk served as tea glasses. We sipped a mythical but oh so delicious tea, ate imaginary cakes, distributed compliments to the eldest of the girls, our hostess.

Then we decided to play bride. The smallest girl was chosen to play the bride. The eldest contented herself with the character of the negafa, one of those women who are experts in organizing such ceremonies. She went down to get a piece of scarf, some rouge for the cheeks, and some finely powdered antimony to blacken the eyes. The bride was installed on a cushion. In a din of you-you and improvised songs, the negafa proceeded according to custom to make up and dress the young bride. She dressed her in a blanket as a dress, did her hair, decorated her with openwork papers, crudely simulating jewels, and went away to admire her work.

One of the boys, driven by an instinct of malice, picked up a handful of earth and threw it at our bride's face. The drama broke out. The bride and her guests began to scream, to fight, to run in all directions, their faces smeared with tears and snot. I screamed like everyone else without knowing why. I tried to free myself from the arms of the big girl who was making vain efforts to calm me down.

One of the women came up, gave me slaps and insults, called me innocent and guilty demons, and took me down under her arm like a package to hand me over to my mother.

I was again subjected to unfair reproaches. My mother threatened to never take me anywhere again.

My mother and her friend started talking again about Rahma, the plow maker's wife, Fatma Bziouya and Aunt Kanza the clairvoyant.

My mother told of her reconciliation with her neighbor on the first floor, of Zineb's escapade, of the meal offered to the poor. She praised Rahma. She regretted her moment of bad humor that had caused the argument. Rahma was becoming a charming young woman, so helpful! So honest!...

- And then, said my mother, she is so pretty! Always smiling, always lively. Her husband can thank God for having given him such a delicious brunette. Don't you love that tanned skin with such fine grain, those big laughing eyes? Isn't it that she has a pretty mouth with firm lips, a little pouty?

Lalla Aïcha approved, nodded, sighed with contentment.

But my mother was already continuing:

- Fatma, my neighbor across the street, has not been forgotten by the Creator either. Pretty eyes drowned in sweetness!

Perfectly curved eyebrows! Amber complexion! But I don't like the tattoo on her chin.

- She has, moreover, the pleasure of her youth, added the friend. Motionless in my corner, I listened. I was surprised to hear my mother do justice to the beauty of our two neighbors. I felt this beauty, but I could not translate it into concrete formulas. I was grateful to my mother for expressing in precise terms what floated in my imagination in the form of vague, confused, unfinished images.

For Aunt Kanza, the two women merely nodded knowingly. Aunt Kanza, the chouafa, belonged to another race for me. She was royal. The jackals felt like jackals around this lioness. Strange is the beauty of queens! Not queens of an ephemeral kingdom divided by hunger, lust and greed, but virgin queens who carry in their flanks a god of equity.

Her large eyes, in her delicate parchment face, fascinated her customers and commanded respect from those who did not like her. To tell the truth, I was vaguely afraid of her. In my dreams I associated her with the dark powers, with the masters of the Invisible with whom she maintained a familiar commerce. I believed that she had unlimited powers and I considered it a privilege to live under the same roof as such a considerable person.

Moulay Larbi, Lalla Aïcha's husband, arrived unexpectedly. He was heard saying at the entrance the phrase consecrates:

- Is there no one? Can I come in?

Three women's voices answered him at once:

- Pass! Pass! Pass!

His footsteps echoed on the stairs.

He went straight into the little room. He had been warned of our visit and was not allowed to see my mother. His wife hurried to join him. A confused murmur, punctuated by silences, buzzed in the little room. It lasted a long time. We were sitting, motionless, mother and I. We did not know what to do. I told my mother about our games on the terrace and the reason for the drama that ensued. She listened to me distractedly, answered me with vague sentences, general advice on how to behave in society.

She got up to look out the window, met the eyes of a neighbor also leaning over the balustrade: contemplating the empty patio. The two women greeted each other, talked about spring, the beginnings of which were always tiring. The stranger took the opportunity to evoke the. Memory of a nzaha, an outdoor party in which she had participated. That was years ago. The countryside, adorned like a bouquet, smelled of honey. The birds answered each other from a bush to a branch. The women ran barefoot in the grass, splashed in the stream, sang cantilenas to delight the heart. In the middle of the afternoon, a storm, of rare violence, struck nature. Hastily, rugs and blankets were gathered. Each one took charge of part of the luggage: empty dishes, accessories for tea, jugs for fresh water. Two men and five women, all relatives, made up the team. The rain was welcomed by some as a blessing, by others as a catastrophe.

- We were in a sorry state when we got back. My beautiful dresses had suffered from the mud. I had a caftan in apricot cloth, such as they no longer make in our time. Over it, I wore a tunic embroidered with mauve flowers and ...

Lalla Aïcha came to find us, her face upset. She motioned to my mother to follow her into the darkest corner of the room. I stayed at the window. The woman who was telling her best memory remained

a moment waiting for my mother to return. Not seeing her return and judging me too young to appreciate the sumptuousness of her clothes, she left her sentence unfinished, sighed, raised her eyes to Heaven to call it to witness the incomprehension of the human race, pulled her head back, disappeared into the velvety shadow of her apartments.

My mother was talking in a low voice with her Friend. I didn't dare approach her. I heard the word "pasha" several times during their mysterious dialogue. This word impressed me, made me feel uneasy. The Pasha? Was he not that cruel character who had people beaten up at his whim? Put them in a dark dungeon with a barley loaf and a jug of water? Let them be devoured by rats? The word "Pasha" made the little people tremble. It was associated in their minds with countless troubles, noisy pains, cries and lamentations. They got into debt to pay the Pasha's henchmen, endured all sorts of vexations in the courtroom and often saw what they considered their rights become, by an operation of the Evil One, charges against them. All these considerations did not prevent them from picking quarrels over trivialities. They ran before the "Pasha" to tell him their little miseries. They often left there dissatisfied, having endured a few rebuffs.

Lalla Aïcha began to cry silently. She hid her face in the sleeve of her dress and sniffled. My mother had her hand returned, put her arm around her shoulders, and spoke to her as she would have spoken to a little girl.

The scene amused me. Lalla Aïcha, older than my mother, let herself be consoled, became the little sister in the arms of her elder. I wanted to laugh, but I knew that was not done. The ridiculousness of the situation forced me to flee up the stairs so as not to appear improper. I would have liked to meet the young stranger who knew so well how to play the negafa. We would have lived together some extravagant adventure, in an enchanted land. Alas! Already, I was doomed to solitude. I sat down on the top of a step and hummed to an improvised tune some meaningless words:

The Pasha!

Eat Lalla Aïcha

O Night! O Night!

Oh my eye!

Cry in solitude.

From the back of the room, my mother called out to me. She asked me if I intended to bray for much longer. I fell silent, leaned against the wall, and soon fell asleep.

I heard someone wake me up. A merciless hand dragged me into Lalla Aïcha's room where the table was set. I was falling asleep. My mother forced me to eat, but I couldn't swallow anything. The chicken with carrots tasted like straw. I made a huge grease stain on my djellaba and was severely reprimanded. Finally, I was left on a mattress where I could snore at my leisure.

When I woke up, the sun had disappeared, the candles were flickering, creating fantastic shadows on the walls.

My father came to get us. I went down the stairs, stumbling at each step. The streets were poorly lit. My father had equipped himself with a tin lantern, gracefully openwork and decorated with colored glass. Silhouettes emerged from the darkness, took human form, disappeared a moment later, behind us, swallowed by the night. I did not recognize any street. I heard footsteps echoing in the distance. They came closer, dissolved. A dog barked. A cat fight broke out on the top of a terrace. The two enemies challenged each other, each proclaiming his bravery and courage, spitting out puffs of anger. Their cries faded away. Only our footsteps, the rustling of our clothes, our hurried breaths

animated this dead city.

We arrived home. My mother put me to bed. I fell asleep.

The next day, Friday, my father came home to lunch as was his custom. He was wearing a dazzlingly white buttoned wool djellaba and a new turban, all stiff with preparation.

The meal was served by my mother. The menu was particularly well prepared. We ate mutton with wild artichokes, couscous with sugar and cinnamon and to finish a delicious orange salad with olive oil.

We sipped many glasses of mint tea. In the center of the tray, two Isfahan roses bloomed in an old porcelain cup.

My mother sighed. She addressed my father:

- Fate is sometimes very cruel. Poor and rich, good and bad are at the mercy of its setbacks.

I am very sad! I think of Lalla Aïcha and my heart bleeds. I did not want to bother you last night with the sad events that took place during the day.

My father listened attentively. She continued:

- Moulay Larbi, Lalla Aïcha's husband, had an argument with his partner, a certain Abdelkader, son of I don't know who...

She looked up at the ceiling to summon:

- God remove from our path, from that of our children and the children of our children, all the sons of sin who come with a smile on their lips and a chest full of darkness. Be our protector and our agent: Amine! This Abdelkader, this son of adultery, this disciple of Satan did not have a clean shirt when. Moulay Larbi took him as a worker in his workshop in Mechatine. He treated him with kindness, lent him money, often received him for lunch or dinner. Abdelkader was polite and even obsequious. He sang the merits of Moulay Larbi, praised his generosity, his good character and the nobility of his feelings. Both worked hard. The embroidered slippers enjoyed great success among the women of Fez. The production of Moulay

Larbi and his worker had a good reputation. Abdelkader thought of getting married. Moulay Larbi encouraged him in this direction and Lalla Aïcha found him a young girl worthy of praise. Marriages always cost a lot. Despite his nights of vigil, Abdelkader had not been able to save. He found himself rather embarrassed when his fiancée needed a dowry. He had recourse to his boss. Moulay Larbi managed to put together eighty rials. He paid them to him without suspicion. He made the mistake of advancing him this money without drawing up a debt recognition paper. To allow Abdelkader to earn more, he associated him with his business.

- Do you know how this son of sin thanked him for his good deeds?

My father didn't know.

My mother did not give him time to answer. She continued in these terms:

- No! You will never be able to guess! People who have no modesty, the barefoot people of bad faith, those who offend God and his Messenger by their dishonest actions will have to account for their bad actions on the day of the Balance. Abdelkader denied, he did not simply deny, he even claimed to have paid half of the capital of the Moulay Larbi business for the purchase of the equipment, the leathers and the gold thread. The Pasha could not know all the details of this story. He did not accept either version of the two adversaries. A guard of the Pasha was charged with leading the investigation, but he contented himself with arguing with the litigants. He demanded a fabulous sum from them for the time he had lost,

he said, to reconcile them. They complied. The matter was brought before the provost of the merchants. He had them accompanied again by one of his guards who asked them to explain the facts to him, but they refused. "Only the experts of the Corporation can understand the subject of the dispute," they said. The experts were brought together. They discussed until the evening. Finally, they ruled in favor of Abdelkader. What an era! There is no justice anymore! It is not the fault of these judges, he will tell me. It is difficult to know the ins and outs of such a case. What is there to judge cases when we do not know all the facts? I know, that is the way the world is, we need judges and crooks to give them work. It is always the honest people who are sacrificed.

My father intervened:

- Not always! Sometimes judges make mistakes.

Even though they are judges, they are nonetheless men, that is to say, subject to error. God alone is never wrong.

- There is no power except in Him, the Unique, who has no partner, said my mother, and she added:

- Finally, all this upset us. Lalla Aicha cried in the evening, she suffered from violent headaches.

A silence followed this conclusion.

I could hear the beads of the rosary being counted by my father's long fingers. Rahma tapped her bread to see if it had risen. Zineb played with the cat, a sickly black cat that the family had adopted to satisfy a whim of their daughter. I listened to what she told her. It was about feeding him honey and butter, stuffed cakes, almonds and chicken legs; the big baby would have a velvet burnous and wear silk turbans.

Big fool! Since when do cats love honey? A cat with a silk turban would be the most ridiculous thing in the world. A girl as stupid as Zineb can't find anything amusing in her poor brain. She didn't know how to play, in my opinion. She was therefore particularly poor and contemptible.

I had treasures hidden in my Box of Wonders. I was the only one who knew them. I could escape from this world of constraint cluttered with pashas, merchant provosts, and venal guards and take refuge in my kingdom where everything was harmony, songs, and music. I had heroes and fair princes as companions. To hear their new exploits, I promised myself to go and listen to Abdallah, the grocer. I had never seen Abdallah, but he held an important place in my world. All the wonderful stories I had had the opportunity to hear, I attributed to him. Yet Abdallah had existed. My father, who did not speak often, devoted an entire evening to talking to my mother about Abdallah and his stories. My father's story excited my imagination, it obsessed me throughout my childhood.

It was winter, the wind slammed the terrace door and whistled up the stairs. I had my head on my father's knees. I listened. He spoke slowly, in his deep voice.

Here is his story:

"Abdallah knows many stories. The ones he tells are rarely funny. They end abruptly, without any search for effects, without any apparent conclusion.

"Abdallah is strangely like his stories. There is poetry and mystery in him. He holds his booth in Haffarine, in this alley so cool in summer and so little frequented in all seasons.

"Abdallah sells all sorts of dusty, faded objects, hanging askew on shelves that are no less dusty, no less faded. He has few customers, but many friends. From morning to night, Abdallah swings his fly swatter, sitting cross-legged on a moth-eaten sheepskin.

"He settled in the neighborhood a long time ago. His stock in trade consisted of two bunches of dwarf palm brooms, about ten baskets of three different sizes, a bundle of string, and a few tin boxes presumably filled with spices.

"Since then, his beard has turned white and the bunches of brooms have diminished very little in volume, there are still two thirds of the baskets, as for the string and the spices, the opportunity has not arisen to start them.

"Abdallah has been telling some stories since he arrived!

He never repeats the same thing and seems inexhaustible. He tells stories to children, to adults, to city dwellers and country dwellers, to those who know it as well as to day visitors.

"Abdallah's stories sometimes last a quarter of an hour and sometimes a morning. He tells them without smiling, to the solemn rhythm of his fly swatter. He tells them without interruption, without drinking or clearing his throat, without waving his hands or occupying his fingers.

"None of the formulas of blessing so dear to Arab storytellers pepper his tale. He tells of strange battles, marvelous idylls, exciting journeys in fairy lands or simply the dispute of a shopkeeper with his neighbor, the night of a barefoot wanderer under the stars, the meal of a beggar.

"Some love him, others hate him without telling him so, but all listen to him captivated.

"Abdallah seems detached; neither the love of some nor the camouflaged hatred of others can draw him out of his indifference. Friends say: Abdallah the wise, Abdallah the poet and even Abdallah the seer. His enemies call him a liar, a hypocrite and sometimes a sorcerer. What is he then?

"He is a grocer who tells stories.

"A particularly malicious notable had asked the head of the district to go and listen to Abdallah's stories because he discovered in them allusions and criticisms directed against the beloved Maghzen.

"Another, on the contrary, affirmed that the Maghzen pays this grocer without spices to stupefy the population and prevent it from interfering in the affairs of the Empire.

"To all this, Abdallah answers with stories. The head of the neighborhood has become his assiduous listener and makes much of his knowledge or what he calls it; Abdallah claims to know nothing, because, he says, true scholars should not tell stories, but tell the truth, speak it and write it.

"A scholar who had devoted his life to an important work one day took all the pages of his books and displayed them on the roof of the Kaaba, the house of God. A year later, the pages were still in their place, without any trace of rain, without any damage from external agents. The ink spread fresh on the white paper. He did not print his work until after this supreme test. He was a thousand times right: nothing can destroy, erase or alter the truth.

And Abdallah added:

" - I am not a Scholar, my stories go in one ear and out the other.

"Is it absolutely true? Is it especially without exception?

Certainly not.

"Abdallah's stories suffer the fate of all the stories that humanity has passed down through the ages. Some laugh at them, others cry at them; some are sensitive to their outward form, others know how to interpret their signs.

"Abdallah is telling a story to some children. One of them says to him:

" - I read a much more beautiful one in my reading book.

"That is quite possible," replied Abdallah; "only the story you read is in a book.

All your friends have this book, and can read it. But the one I told you is in only one book, it is this one... And he pointed to his heart.

"Abdallah closes his shop every evening and leaves slowly.

No one in the neighborhood knows where he lives. There is Si Abdennebi, a malicious gossip, who claims to have seen him enter a vulgar fondouk.

"Lahbib, on the contrary, who followed him, recounts his curious adventure in these terms:

"Our Lord Abdallah is a friend of God. I followed him, may God forgive me, to Seffah, on the other bank of the Oued Fez. In a dead end, the door of a zaouia of green zellijs opens. He enters and, after a minute, I follow him. I look for him in vain. The zaouia was deserted. I gave a long tekbir and fainted. Now I do not listen to what the ignorant say, because I know, yes, I know that the friends of God have hidden dwellings.

"Lahbib may be right." Abdennebi, who was present, replied:

"Lahbib has listened to Abdallah's stories too much, his brain is sick. Allah alone knows: Abdallah's actions are not those of an honest Muslim. Have you ever seen him pray?

Does he leave his shop at mealtimes? Does he observe Friday? Does he ever utter a pious word? He is a corrupter, a turbaned Satan, a white-bearded demon who lives in lies like a pig in the mud.

"Lahbib, usually peaceful by nature, blushed with indignation.

He cried out:

"- Should he then resemble you to deserve the name of Muslim? You say your prayers, we are witnesses, you leave your shop at meal times; you respect Friday and your speeches are full of Koranic quotes and hadiths. All this, we are witnesses. But from your mouth often flow the venom of slander, the stench of calumny, the smell of death and other seeds of destruction. You are not even Satan because none of your works bears the seal of a certain greatness. At most, you are a sewer rat, but one who would have rolled in good white flour.

He thinks that the flour will make him pure, when his touch is enough to defile it.

"Abdennebi jumped to strike him; Lahbib, a blacksmith by trade, grabbed him by the wrists and without getting moved he continued his sermon:

"You see, the weak always resort to violence. My arms wield iron and do not fear fire; therefore, I will not use it to crush cockroaches of your kind. I am not defending Abdallah the grocer, I am simply trying to enlighten your ignorance, you, who claim to be so learned! But you have a thick skull and a mummified soul. You are a corpse and I do not like to touch carrion.

"Lahbib threw Abdennebi against the wall and left. He fasted for more than a week to purify himself of his anger.

"This was told to Abdallah. He remained silent at first, swinging his fly swatter, then told a story."

Chapter V

I had never seen the master of the Msid as smiling as he was this Wednesday. Not one student received the caning. The quince rod became a fancy accessory, one of those useless objects that one holds to occupy one's fingers.

I recited my lesson as usual. The master congratulated me:

- Well done, my son, he said to me, you will be, if it pleases God, a taleb mendicant of knowledge. May Allah open the doors of knowledge to you!

Before going to lunch, the fqih made a sign for us to be quiet. In the general silence, he spoke to us about Ashura, the New Year's celebration. We had to celebrate it with dignity according to custom. Our Msid would be illuminated from midnight. All the students would come to inaugurate the New Year with joy and work. We had fifteen days to prepare for the celebration.

Everyone was to bring a bowlful of olive oil to fuel the lamps, the school would be whitewashed, the old mats changed and replaced with new ones. The fqih asked us to inform our parents of these arrangements. He was counting on their generosity.

Finally, to our great joy, we were given the rest of the day off. What joy! I ran home to tell my mother. Fatma Bziouya told me that she was away. Lalla Aïcha, her friend, had come to get her about an hour earlier. My joy turned to apprehension, soon to worry. This outing certainly had some connection with the Moulay Larbi affair, Lalla Aïcha's husband. Perhaps a new disagreement still opposed him to that demon Abdelkader, son of I don't know who? Hadn't he been locked up in a dark prison? It smelled of the pasha, the provost and their henchmen.

My mother had left the key in the bedroom door. I went in. The objects no longer recognized me, they opposed a hostile face to me. They amused themselves by frightening me, they transformed themselves into monsters, became familiar objects again, borrowed new masks of beasts of the apocalypse. I stood on a mattress, terrified, my throat dry, waiting for my mother to return, the only person capable of delivering me from these spells. I did not move, for fear of arousing the animosity of the beings who spied on me behind each thing. Centuries passed. My mother's shuffling footsteps reached me from the ground floor. I heard her cough. The room resumed its everyday appearance. A ray of sunlight enlivened the faded mosaics.

My mother, out of breath, stopped on the landing. I rushed to meet her. Fatma Bziouya was scaling small fish carved like jewels. She put down her knife, washed her hands vaguely, dried herself with a cloth she wore as an apron and without asking questions waited for her mother to reveal the reason for her absence.

My mother, mysterious, made him promise the greatest discretion. Then, she launched into a long

speech whispered from mouth to ear, accompanied by facial expressions, broad gestures of both arms, punctuated by sighs, illustrated by nods of the head.

Fatma listened with her whole body tense, her eyes followed every gesture, her fingers unconsciously sketched brief movements. To my mother's sighs, she responded with sighs, to her nods with nods. The story stopped short. Fatma, her right hand on her cheek, her left hand on her heart, repeated:

- Allah! Allah! Allah! God! God! God!

- Yes! my mother would say, yes! All this breaks the heart and cannot leave the tender soul of a Muslim indifferent. One cannot wish on one's worst enemy what has just happened to Lalla Aïcha, but the Believer must thank God, even in misfortune.

She finally noticed my presence. She invited me to follow her. She got rid of her haik, left his black sheepskin shoes.

- I will, she said to me, give you something to eat, you must be starving.

She took out a reddish-brown glazed pottery from the storeroom, inserted her entire forearm into it and finally extracted a long strip of canned meat. I liked canned meat. She served me pieces as big as my thumb in a dish, swimming in delicious fat that she had carefully heated. The bread was fresh and perfumed with anise. I ate alone. My mother disappeared. I knew that she was whispering somewhere to Rahma, the tenant of the first floor, the new story of Lalla Aïcha, after having made her promise to keep it a secret. I also knew that I had only to wait. I would glean a word here, another there, I would know what it was about. I finished eating in a hurry. I went to join my mother on the terrace where Rahma, in fact, was sitting in the shade, on a sheepskin, combing her hair. She had stopped her work and was listening. Her black hair, coated with olive oil, spilled over her shoulders. My mother said:

- The poor woman has sold everything. Even the rats have nothing left to eat.

- And the money? Rahma asked.

My mother hastened to inform her.

- The money will be used to purchase equipment from Moulay Larbi and to cover the initial installation costs of his new workshop.

Rahma nodded to show that she understood perfectly. She agreed:

- That's very good 1 Very good!

Feeling encouraged, my mother explained:

- Lalla Aïcha, cherifa of a large tent, cannot let her husband fall in the eyes of the corporation of babouchiers and from boss become a simple employee. The Believer in this world encounters many obstacles, the essential thing for him is to overcome all difficulties without ever rebelling against his Creator. Moulay Larbi, generous man, deserves that a woman with noble feelings strips herself of her jewels and her furniture so that he does not lose face in the eyes of his peers. Lalla Aïcha does a good deed. God will repay her a hundredfold, the Day when the son cannot come to the aid of his father, the Day when the father cannot hide the children of his blood from the sentence of the Supreme Judge. Only our good and our bad deeds will weigh in the Balance. Weak and puny as we are, we can only count on the mercy of Allah the Omnipotent.

Rahma echoed him:

- May He be glorified 1 There is no God but Him.

Silence reigned. Rahma continued to pull at her hair with a horn comb. My mother began standing up, heaved a long sigh, finally said:

- I helped Lalla Aïcha as best I could in her efforts, now I feel sad and tired.

My mother and I started up the stairs.

Screams and yells tore through the air. The storm of tears and shouts intensified. The noise came from the neighboring house. We ran back upstairs. Once the surprise had passed, questions came from everywhere:

- Who died? Who died?

Groups of women had formed above the walls overlooking our terrace and that of the house from which the cries of despair were coming. They chattered, explained, gesticulated, craned their necks to hear new screams.

In the din, one could distinguish a voice, more shrill than the others, lamenting. Women were coming from distant terraces, jumping over the dividing walls, juggling with a ladder that was too short. Some stood astride the wall, others let their legs hang down. An old negress, of whom I could see only the head and two bare arms of a shiny black, waved her two hands, the pink palms of which fascinated me; she imposed silence on the women.

- I know who died, repeated the old slave several times: Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the hairdresser. He had been ill for two months.

- What did he die of? asked a young woman wearing a yellow scarf on her head.

- God alone knows, replied the negress, but it is indeed Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the hairdresser, who is dead.

The women remained silent. The head of the negress disappeared. The hands stopped for a moment on the edge of the wall and then vanished in turn.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the hairdresser. He dressed in white, had a scanty beard, and on his lips floated an eternal smile. He did his own shopping and many times I had come across him in our dead-end laden with a basket of alfa grass; one could see the vegetables of the season, sometimes a piece of pink meat, onions or garlic.

The screams had died down, the din had turned into continuous wailing in a tone serious, a kind of song with a naive rhythm.

My mother went down to the room, she came back up, her head wrapped in a light blanket. She said to Rahma:

- I'm going to go over the wall, it will do me good to go and cry a little.

- But, I said to him, take me, I want to cry a little too.

- No, decided my mother, you are still too young and besides you are a boy. In a moment, the reciters of the Quran will come and chant and you can join them.

- I want to cry! I want to cry! I insisted.

- Catch and cry for real.

This sentence was accompanied by a masterful slap.

I started sobbing. Rahma intervened on my behalf. She finally convinced my mother to take me. The two women helped me over the shared wall. I was no longer crying. I jumped up the steps four at a time to join the mourners on the ground floor.

There were about twenty of them, who were loudly showing their grief. On the floor, there were mattresses and mats. Other mourners were arriving, announcing themselves at the entrance with shrill cries. Those who were already at home answered them with other vociferations. The hairdresser's wife, her voice hoarse, was moaning, hitting herself hard with the flat of her hand, on her cheeks and thighs. The spectacle fascinated me to the point of forgetting the purpose of my visit. I had come to cry and I was not crying. I was trying to understand what a disheveled old woman was saying. She lowered her head to the ground, raised it again, sang, lengthening the endings:

You were the pillar of my house

You were my umbrella and my shield

You were the brave rider.

Without you the house will become dark

Without you, the sun will become cold.

Without you, I have no eyes to see.

My eyes won't be able to stop watering

My eyes will shed tears of blood.

My eyes will dry up and I will wander in darkness.

A young woman who was a stranger to the house remained wrapped in her haik. She repeated in every tone:

Oh my mother! Oh my poor mother!

Oh my mother! I loved you more than anything in the world

Some hiccupped without saying anything, others invoked the saints, addressed fervent prayers to God and His Prophet. In a corner, some children were whining. I approached them.

I found Zineb. She was making vain efforts to do as the others did, rubbing her eyes, but no tears were flowing from them. They were still as dry and as shiny as when she was causing me some misery. I looked at her for a moment and with a movement as quick as it was unexpected, I punched her on the nose. Torrents of tears flooded her face. Her cries dominated the tumult. I fled to the terrace.

I had lost sight of my mother. I knew she must be moaning and ranting at her leisure, without paying attention to her neighbors.

The psalmists were announced at the door of the house. The women took refuge on the first floor. They continued to cry quietly as the Quran reciters began a long chapter.

Finally, my mother came back up, took me by the hand and helped me back over the dividing wall.

We went to our room.

Fatma Bziouya came to ask my mother how the hairdresser's wife was. Who were the women who were crying? Was the hairdresser's mother still alive?

My mother spoke of the hairdresser's wife's pain, named some of the assistants, and admitted that she had not known of the mother's existence.

Lalla Kanza, the chouafa, from her ground floor, took part in the conversation. Everyone drew from the event this eminently philosophical conclusion: all beings are mortal; sooner or later there will come our turn.

The buzzing of the reciters reached us through the walls. From time to time, the hairdresser's wife let out a long scream. Each of her cries tore a powerful sigh from my mother. I didn't dare play. Could I decently take out my trinkets, on the day that Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar the hairdresser, an important personality in our impasse, left his parents, his friends and his customers forever?

Soon, after the ritual ablutions, he will be dressed in white for the last time. Men will carry him on their heads on a comfortable cedar stretcher and will go to bury him in the damp earth. The earth will close for eternity on Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the hairdresser. I dreamed of all this, leaning on the balustrade of our window. A great sadness invaded me. Fatigue took hold of my limbs. I asked my mother for permission to lie down on the big bed. She agreed. I threw myself on it and continued to think about the hairdresser's funeral. I saw him, tightly sewn in his white cotton, rigid on his stretcher covered with a roof, traveling on a sea of turbaned heads, in a concert of litanies and invocations. I had already seen funeral processions pass through the street. Sometimes the men walked slowly, solemnly and sang a hymn with voices as deep as chasms, sometimes they were very few in number and hurried their steps. They were content to repeat in a head voice the formula of the unity of God: the shahada (There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet).

I had even seen dead people discovered, simply placed on the stretcher and with no one to accompany them to their final resting place. I had found that infinitely sad.

My father, to whom I had shared my impression, found this story to console me:

In a busy souk, there was a shop called Sidi... (I have forgotten his name). He was a pious man, honest and courteous to everyone. Every time a funeral procession passed through the souk, this holy person took his slippers, put them on in haste, and accompanied the dead man to the cemetery. One day, two undertakers happened to pass by carrying the stretcher on which lay the body of a beggar that no one was accompanying. The man got up, took his slippers from the shelf where he put them every day, but remained standing without putting them on. He ended up putting them back in their place. The shopkeepers considered his behavior uncharitable.

- He only accompanies the funeral processions of the rich, they said.

Sidi ... who overheard their murmurs declared to them:

- Are you believers? Then listen to why I did not accompany this brother To his grave.

When I took my slippers, I had the intention of doing so, but I saw arriving behind the stretcher an immense crowd of beings of incomparable beauty. They were the angels of Paradise. I, a simple sinner, did not dare to mingle with these forms of light. A friend of God was going away in the mercy of his Creator. I was happy to know it and sat down again among my spices.

Whenever I met two undertakers carrying a solitary corpse, I repeated with them:

- God accompany you, O stranger, on this earth!

I also mentally added: "He too joins his tomb accompanied by a crowd of angels of a incomparable beauty." I was very happy about it.

The screams and howls resumed with increasing intensity. They pierced the walls, crashing like the sound of waves or the raging of a storm.

The women of our house dropped their work. They began to cry, to moan beside their braziers and their pots.

The body was probably going to leave the house. It was a pathetic moment. I could still hear the humming of the psalmists. The sun hid behind a cloud, an immense sorrow fell on the earth. I burst into tears. My mother, distraught, forgot the hairdresser and his funeral and rushed to ask me the reasons for my tears. She questioned me, worried.

- Where did you hurt yourself? Did an insect bite you? Do you have colic?

I sniffled even more, I didn't answer. The crisis lasted a long time. I refused to eat. My mother had cooked lentils with tomatoes and onions. I usually liked them, but I didn't want to touch them. I remained lying on the bed. My mother spread over me a blanket of raw wool decorated with red stripes at the ends. I dozed until my father arrived, late in the evening. I agreed to drink a glass of milk and dove back under the covers.

My father seemed very concerned about me. He touched my temples several times, took my hand, and arranged my blanket with the gestures of an officiant. I saw his lips moving. I knew that he was reciting some invocation or some verse with saving power.

"Maybe I'll die too," I thought. "Maybe I'll have angels behind my coffin." beautiful as the light of day!"

I imagined the procession: a few people from the neighborhood, the fqih of the Koranic school, my father, more serious than ever, and angels, thousands of angels dressed in white silk. At home, my mother would scream until her throat was torn, she would cry for days and nights. She would be all alone in the evening to wait for my father to return.

No! I didn't want to die!

- I don't want to die! I cried, sitting up in bed. I don't want to die!

I threw off my blanket and stood up, screaming this sentence at the top of my lungs. My Father put me back to bed, calming my anxieties with gentle words. My mother, her eyes puffy, repeated:

- My little child! My little child!

I calmed down. My ears began to whistle. I listened, through the sound of water, to my mother recounting the events of the day. The death of Sidi Mohammed ben Tahar, the hairdresser, the misfortunes of Lalla Ai-cha, the sale of her jewelry and furniture. She said that Sidi Larbi L'Alaoui was going to set up a workshop and get back to work. She praised the generosity and courage of Lalla Aicha, hurled imprecations against hypocrites, crooks, people without faith or law like this Abdelkader, son of I don't know who.

Meanwhile, between the fringes of my eyelashes, I saw beautiful white angels descending from the ceiling, I could make out the feathers of their silver-coloured wings. One of them placed my Wonder Box on my bed. It grew enormously, took the shape of a coffin. I entered it very happily. The lid fell. In the box reigned a freshness of roses and orange blossoms. The Box was carried away beyond the clouds into emerald palaces. All the birds were singing. I found the two sparrows who woke me up every morning. They were chatting as usual:

- I like dried figs.
- Why do you like dried figs?
- Everyone loves dried figs
- Yes! Yes! Yes!
- Everyone loves dried figs.
- Dried figs!
- Dried figs!
- Dried figs!

A burning sensation on my eyelids forced me to open my eyes. A ray of sunlight entered through the window. It was falling straight on my face. The sparrows were singing the virtues of dried figs.

- May your morning be blessed, my little one! my mother said to me with a broad smile. You are better now-
nant; you had a little fever last night. Today promise me to be very good.

You won't go to school.

- I'm not sick, I told him.
- I know! I know! Play quietly in your corner. Eat this donut, it's still hot.

I took the donut.

Driss the Moody called from downstairs. He was coming with the supplies for the day. My mother went down to get them. I heard Fatma Bziouya saying:

- Already purple! It's a beautiful green!

My mother answered with a sentence I didn't catch. She went into her kitchen, moved buckets, ac-
He opened his bellows and pounded his spices in the bronze mortar.

On the first floor Rahma was busy on the landing. She was also stoking the fire and pounding condiments. Someone was humming. Our old bellows made itself heard again. It was tired and could only say these words:

Flies!

Flies!

Flies!

Rahma's varied his repertoire. Sometimes he took pleasure in repeating:

I'm hot!

I'm hot!

I'm hot!

Or else:

I'm suffering!

I'm suffering!

I'm suffering!

I stopped listening to the bellows. Other noises came to distract me. Explosions of sparks rolled like marbles that spread across the mosaic floor. Fatma Bziouya was carding her wool.

Whispered sentences rose from the ground floor. Lalla Kanza was talking to a customer. A burst of laughter disturbed the atmosphere. It was brief and inconsequential. A pigeon cooed on the terrace. It said such pretty words that I smiled at the angels. I noticed on a beam two flies engaging in a chase, stopping for no reason and then resuming their race to adventure. At the door of the house someone knocked on the hammer.

- Who is there? asked several voices.

Whoever it was, I had no desire to know. From the sky flowed to me a frail sound, a song tenuous and fragile like a virgin's thread. The Moudden announced the prayer. From a distant minaret reached me in wide waves the formula: God is the greatest!

The song died, melted into the blue of the sky, was reborn, asserted itself with a certain vigor, dissolved again in the spring air.

A large, metallic black bumblebee dropped through the opening overlooking the patio, slammed against the wall and flew violently through our bedroom window onto the glass of the oil lamp.

The glass clinked but resisted the shock. The insect left with as much haste as it had entered. This visit delighted me. I began to laugh and clap my hands.

I listened for a while longer for the noises of the house, but this game tired me. My mother came back to see me, smiled at me and, doubtless satisfied with the state of my health and my great wisdom, went back to work in her buckets and pound her spices.

To occupy myself, I recited the little of the Quran I knew, first in a low voice, then with all the strength of my vocal cords, I chanted the words of the holy book with passion. My memory dried up. I hesitated for a moment before resuming, with more fervor, my psalmody. I was inventing my own Quran. Words without sequence and without meaning took flight, swirled in the atmosphere of the room, bursting toward the sky like swarms of richly colored butterflies.

My mother came to see me again. She advised me to be less ardent in my singing. I could have a fever. She pulled a copper chain, eaten away by verdigris, from her dress and handed it to me:

- Add this to your wonders, she said to me.

The delicately worked chain absorbed my attention. I contemplated it for a long time. I decided to clean it. I knew how to transform copper, that vile material, into pure gold. I went out onto the landing. In a dented tin can, I discovered some fine sand that was used to clean round tables and tea trays. I set to work actively. My fingers were aching when the expected result appeared before my eyes. I rinsed it many times in a bucket of blackish water in which a small doum broom was swimming.

My chain turned into a gold jewel. I wrapped it around my wrist to admire the effect: I held it by both ends, applied it to my chest, to my forehead, I made a bracelet out of it. I took out my Box. I spread all my riches on a blanket.

The humblest of my buttons and nails, by a magic operation of which I alone had the secret, were transformed into jewels.

Absorbed in contemplating my treasures, I had not seen Zineb's cat come in. He purred right next to me. I was not afraid of him. I decided to share my joy with him, to open the doors of my universe to him. He took a serious interest in my speech, stretched out his paw to touch my cut glass cabochon, looked with astonishment at my gold chain. I made him a necklace. He seemed very proud at first. Then he tried to tear it off. It did not yield to his claws. He became angry, panicked and took off at a rapid pace, his tail bristling, his eyes dilated with worry. I ran after him to retrieve my possession.

The damned cat remained deaf to my calls. He wanted nothing to do with me, he climbed the stairs, spitting threats.

I alerted my mother, asked for help from Fatma Bziouya, Rahma and even my enemy Zineb, the owner of this quadruped demon. Everyone rushed to the terrace but the cat, not knowing why he was being chased, wore out his claws climbing up a dizzyingly high wall.

I was furious with the cat. The women tried to console me.

- He will come back tonight, Zineb will give you back your chain.

Zineb! Zineb! It was she who had asked him to come and rub himself against me, to abuse my kindness and to steal my most beautiful jewel. I was suffocating with anger and indignation. My rage was unleashed; I rushed at Zineb. I dug my nails into her cheeks, tore out her hair in clumps, and kicked her in the stomach. She defended herself; the brute violently pulled my ears, threw me to the ground, and stepped on my chest. The women screamed, tried to separate us and received punches and headbutts from both adversaries.

Finally my mother managed to control me. She took me into the bedroom, plunged my head into a bucket of water, wiped my face with a cloth and ordered me to lie down.

My chest still shaking with sobs, I fell asleep almost immediately.

Chapter VI

The schoolroom was accessed by four steps. The Msid, a long, somewhat rustic room, had a large attic. The teacher installed two glazed pottery jars up there to collect the olive oil that the students brought in bottles and bowls. The older ones were responsible for it.

To buy new mats, everyone contributed according to their means. The father of a pupil was a lime-burner. He donated a donkey's load of lime to the school. On Monday, eight days before the feast of Ashura, the old mats were put away in the attic. The master formed teams and appointed their leaders. Buckets and doum brushes were borrowed.

The work began. In a din of insults, exclamations, tears and bursts of laughter, some seized the wolf heads, perched high on the reeds, and struggled for a long time to clean the ceiling and walls of their cobwebs.

Two huge buckets of whitewash were prepared. About ten students, armed with brooms, took to whitewashing the walls.

They boldly handled their brooms, splashing squealing children as they passed. They received the quicklime in their eyes, began to howl, abandoning their work. Others replaced them, full of ardor. Arguments broke out. Everyone shouted at once. Sometimes, above this tide, the master's voice rumbled. The noise stopped for a second, then started again, more exasperated, more shrill.

I managed to grab a broom, dipped it in the whitewash and, delighted, rushed to the wall to show all these maggots how to seriously whitewash. I came up against a rampart of pink arms, open mouths, eyes bulging with fury.

Hands grabbed my broom. I resisted with all my strength, but the fight was unequal. I dropped the precious instrument and found myself sitting in a puddle of water that froze my behind. I didn't think about crying, I got up, determined to take back my property. I threw myself into the fray, but the master's voice dominated the tumult.

We stopped, quivering with anger. Stretching out our arms and hands, fingers spread, we all began to explain the object of the misunderstanding; we all demanded justice; the voice of each of us tried to dominate that of the others.

The master imposed silence on us, relieved us of our duties and, seeing our dejected faces, advised us to wait until he needed us. We waited in a corner. The fqih decreed that only the great were allowed to whitewash the walls. We waited until the evening for the master to charge us with rendering the least service. Nothing happened!

The walls were whitewashed. The next day, teams were formed again, each group

had his specialty. I became an important person. I was appointed head of the scrubbers. The floor was washed. About twenty students, carrying enormous buckets, carried out the water chore. They went to fetch it from the fountain of a zaouïa located fifty steps from our school.

The floor was flooded. I took my work very seriously and, to set an example, I wielded my broom energetically. My back ached. From time to time, I straightened up all red. The muscles in my arms ached. When I was resting, I could feel them trembling. In water up to my ankles, barefoot, jostled by this one, insulted by that one, I was happy! Goodbye to lessons, collective recitations, rigid, boring, inhuman boards! Let us scrub the beaten earth floor, encrusted with dust and grime, decorated with enormous lime stars, which resisted our energetic brushing.

- Ouch! You elbowed me in the eye.
- Be careful! You've wet me up to my waist.
- Look Driss, he fell into the bucket.
- Ha! Ha! He's going to drown! He's going to drown!
- Rub lazy.
- Lazy yourself, our corner is cleaner than yours.

With jute rags we wiped everywhere.

In the evening I came home dead tired, but very proud of my day.

In front of my parents I boasted of my many exploits.

I managed to convince them that without me no serious results would have been obtained. My father congratulated me- quote. He told my mother that I was really becoming a man. I went to bed.

During my sleep, I happened to sit up, shout orders, distribute insults. My mother would put me back to bed with tender gestures and affectionate phrases.

In the morning, I got ready to go to school, my mother stopped me. She explained that she needed me to accompany her to the Kissaria, the fabric market. It was time to think about my party clothes. I applauded enthusiastically.

- Will I get a new shirt?
- You will have a new shirt.
- Will I wear a waistcoat with braids?
- You will wear a waistcoat with braids.
- Shall I wear my white djellaba that you put in the trunk?
- You will wear your white djellaba, new slippers made for you by Moulay Larbi, Lalla's husband. Aicha and a beautiful embroidered bag.

I stood up to my full height, puffed out my chest; I even did a few steps of a barbaric dance. I only indulged in such eccentricities in exceptional circumstances. I would even let out a hoot or two when my mother reminded me to be more dignified.

Fatma Bziouya laughed heartily. Her laughter did not shock me. This morning, I felt capable of kindness, of indulgence, I was of boundless generosity. I forgave Zineb, deep down,

all the miseries she had made me suffer; I forgave her cat who had come back after getting rid of his collar, my beautiful gold chain, I forgave Tuesdays for being too long days, the quince stick for so often biting the fragile flesh of my ears, I forgave the laundry days for being particularly cold and sad, I forgave everything in the world or at least what I knew of the world.

I left my mother to attend to her many tasks before getting ready to go out and I went up to the terrace where no one could see me scattering to the four winds the excess of joy with which I felt overflowing. I ran, I sang, I violently beat the walls with a stick found there by the happiest of chances. The stick became a sabre. I handled it skillfully. I slew invisible enemies, I cut off the heads of pashas, provosts of merchants and their henchmen. The stick became a horse and I paraded, wriggling my behind kicking. I was the courageous rider, dressed in an immaculate djellaba and a braided waistcoat. My embroidered satchel pulled at my shoulder so heavy was my supply of cartridges. I dropped my stick, I rushed down the stairs to answer my mother's call.

When I heard her, she was already calling me a Jew, a mangy dog, and many other unflattering names. This couldn't have been her first call. She must have, as always, lured me with kind words, phrases like:

- Has my cherif played enough?
- Does my cherif not want to answer his mother?
- Come down quickly, my darling!
- What are you waiting for to get down, stubborn mule?
- Can't you hear me, you tar-faced donkey?
- What's wrong with you, you mangy dog?
- Wait until I come up and get you, you undignified Jew!

In the fever of the game, the intoxication of the cavalcade, I had not heard all this oration. Only the insulting terms like Jew and mangy dog had abruptly thrown me into the real world.

I joined my mother, my ear low, my elbow raised as a shield to ward off any attempt at violence.

My mother, while vehemently reproaching me for my conduct, contented herself with taking me by the shoulders and shaking me. She was ready to go out. Draped in her white haik, with black slippers on her feet, she hastened to cover her face tightly with white cotton and we left.

Rahma asked her to find out about the current prices of fabrics, especially the price of this muslin. called "parsley" and this fashionable satin, which bore the pretty name of "sultan's bouquet".

We had already travelled some distance, we were almost at the bend in the alley, when Lalla Kanza, the chouafa, called us back.

My mother was reluctant to go back the same way. She asked her from afar what she wanted. From the house, the main tenant expressed her intention to renew the stock of her brotherhood robes. She needed a large number of cubits of black satin to calm the mood of the great benevolent genius, King Bel Lahmer. For some time, she had also felt a sneaky evil, due to the action of Lalla Mira. To put an end to the evil, a dress of a flame yellow was necessary. There was indeed Sidi Moussa to satisfy, his color was royal blue, but last year's dress could still be used.

- Give the money to my son.

My mother pushed me in the direction of the house.

- I could actually save you all that shopping.

The chouafa gave me the money. She only wanted to buy the black satinette. Finally, we soon found ourselves in the street.

Near Sidi Ahmed Tijani, this mosque with richly decorated doors, a woman rushed towards my mother. She was overflowing with joy, thanking God for having put us on her path. She leaned over me and pressed her rough veil to my cheek to kiss me. She was a neighbor of Lalla Aicha, my mother's friend. The two women leaned against the wall of the mosque and began a long conversation about the Moulay Larbi affair which, thanks to Lalla Aicha's devotion, had ended so happily.

Moulay Larbi deserved such a sacrifice. As soon as his workshop was prosperous, he would not fail to buy back his wife's jewelry, furniture and blankets. He was not a man to forget services rendered.

However, before leaving us, the neighbor added this perfidious sentence:

- But who can trust men? I have been married three times, each time my husband only thought of stripping me of the little property I possessed. Let us hope that Lalla Aicha has not fallen on an ungrateful and odious pretender.

My mother said sententiously:

- God alone is the judge.

We left the talkative neighbor. The shopping districts had a festive air. A crowd of city dwellers and country people crowded into the street of the grocers, the notaries' square, the dried fruit market. Donkey drivers pushed puny beasts heavily laden with sacks of sugar, crates of candles, bales of cotton, earthenware dishes and trinkets.

At every intersection, a complicated traffic jam formed. We always ended up weaving through groups of onlookers. To move around more easily, I had taken off my slippers. I put them in my hood. At every step, my mother warned me to be very careful with them. I could lose them in the jostling or have them stolen. I reassured her. I could feel them lightly beating on my back.

I saw the first fabric shops. They could be recognized from afar. To attract customers, the merchants hung silk banners, faded knits, and handkerchiefs embroidered with flat stitch on their awnings.

The Kisaran, the meeting place for all the city's elegant ladies, seemed to me to contain the fabulous treasures of Soleiman, son of David. Caftans of amaranth cloth, waistcoats preciously decorated with braid and silk buttons, djellabas in wool veil, sumptuous burnouses stood side by side with iridescent tulles like spider webs under the dew, taffetas, moiré satins and wildly colored cretonnes.

The chirping of the women lent this place an inexplicable atmosphere of intimacy. The merchants were unlike those in other souks. Most were young men, handsome in face, very neat in their attire, courteous in their speech. They never got angry, displayed limitless patience, went out of their way to show a customer a fabric lying on the highest shelf, unfolded the piece, folded it again to put it back in its place, the customer having found under a pile of silks, a fabric that she liked better.

We went to five or six shops before buying three cubits of white cotton. It was to be used to make me a shirt. It was good quality cotton, the "Poisson" quality. My mother did not want any other brand. The merchant showed us, printed in blue on a fairly

great length of the piece, a fish with all its scales. The bargaining ceremony lasted much less than when it was necessary to pay for the red waistcoat with braids.

We stopped in front of about ten shops. The merchants were eager to show us piles of vests in my size. All the shades of red paraded before our eyes; none of them matched the tone my mother wanted. Finally she settled on a cherry-colored vest abundantly decorated with streamers and fleurons in braid, slightly darker than the fabric.

She took off my djellaba, tried on my vest, buttoned it up to my neck, moved away to see the effect, motioned for me to turn right, then to turn left, took an infinite time to unbutton it, made a ball of it which she roughly shoved into the hands of the merchant. The shopkeeper asked:

- Do you like this article?
- The price will decide, my mother replied.
- So, I prepare the package; to serious customers, I always grant a discount. This vest sold commonly-ment five reals, I'll let you have it for only four reals.
- Let's cut short any discussion, I'll offer you two reals.
- You're not offering me the cost price, I swear! I won't give it up for that price, should I? begging tonight to feed my children.

The merchant had finished folding the vest carefully and was looking for a piece of paper to wrap it up.

- Listen, said my mother, I am a mother, I take care of my house, I hardly have time to bargain. Would you let me have this vest for two and a quarter reals? I am making this sacrifice for my son who would so much like to wear this garment on the day of Ashura.

- I like this boy, I will make an effort on his behalf, give me three and a half reals.

The merchant held out his hand. He expected to receive the money.

My mother turned her back on him, took me by the wrist and led me a few steps.

- Come! she said to me, there is no shortage of waistcoats at Kissaria. We will find a shopkeeper se-laughable who knows how to speak reasonably.

The merchant began to call us back in an urgent tone.

- Come back Lalla! Come back! This child likes the vest.

I would rather give it to you than deprive him of the pleasure of wearing it. Of course, there is no shortage of vests in the shops of Kissaria, but will you really be able to find one of this quality? Admire the care with which all the seams have been made. Look at the workmanship of the buttons ... Take this vest; pay me the price you consider reasonable. You seem to me to be a cherifa full of baraka, I will ask you not to forget me in your prayers so that the Prophet will intercede on my behalf on the day of judgment.

My mother would lose her mind when, by chance, someone called her a chérifa. She rummaged in her pockets, took out a rag tied several times, and struggled for a while to untie it. She took out two and a half reals, which she handed to the merchant without saying anything. She did not take the time to listen to the shopkeeper demand more. She grabbed the package and dragged me away.

We wandered around the souk for a while longer. My mother read up on the price of fabrics, fashion trends, the meaning of this or that design.

We left this atmosphere of splendor to find ourselves in the spice district. We were near the Attarine madrasa, this beautiful house where students live, when I reminded my mother of the satinette of Lalla Kanza the *chouafa*. My mother congratulated me on having such a good memory. She turned back. Along the street she cursed all the *chouafas* of the earth, these calamitous women who never missed an opportunity to poison your life. She wondered what she could have done with the money of this cursed witch Kanza who could, if she wanted, do her errands herself. She stood at the corner of a shop, undertook a meticulous search, got angry, became agitated, launched new imprecations against the *chouafas* and their acolytes, finally finding the money at the bottom of a pocket of her caftan.

It didn't take long for us to find a satinette merchant.

Without discussing the price, my mother asked for a certain number of cubits. She paid it and we finally left.

My mother's good mood had disappeared. She did not stop scolding me for no reason until we arrived home. She gave Lalla Kanza her black satinette, gave her her change and went up the stairs, moaning and sighing at each step.

Rahma came out onto the landing. She invited us into her room. She asked my mother to show her her acquisitions.

Rahma's room was the same size as ours. A wooden partition, weathered by age, cut three-quarters of it. Behind this partition, Rahma piled up her winter provisions. They consisted mainly of salt loaves, a pink stained with gray, and bunches of onions. The room, poorly furnished with lumpy mattresses and a rush mat, had, as its only luxury, a long painted shelf.

This shelf supported about ten flowered earthenware bowls, two plates decorated with superb roosters and half a dozen goblet-shaped glasses.

Zineb was playing in a corner with her cat. She was holding out a tiny mirror to it. The animal saw a round eye staring at it fixedly. Worried, it stretched out its paw, but its claws scratched the smooth surface of the glass. It repeated its routine two or three times, looked behind the mirror; the mystery remained. It smelled some trickery, became angry, spat out some vulgar language, and took off at full speed, its tail bristling. Zineb laughed out loud.

For a long time, I had wanted a small round mirror like hers. I didn't dare ask my mother to buy me one. She would have imagined that I wanted it to look at me and would not have failed to call me an effeminate boy.

Rahma complimented my mother on her purchases and admired my vest. It was dark in that room. The red of the vest took on tones of crimson velvet. A beautiful deep color, discreet and royal at the same time that intoxicated me. I felt swollen with a noble pride. This garment was mine. On the day of Ashura, I would dazzle our friends and acquaintances. The students of the Msid would speak to me with deference. Young and old address legendary princes with respect.

Wouldn't I be a legendary prince with this sumptuous vest, my future "fish" quality shirt?
"and the pair of slippers that Moulay Larbi, the best babouche maker in the whole city, promised me?"

My mother whispered, leaning over our neighbor, brushing her cheek. It was none of my business. What women mysteriously whisper in a dark room cannot interest little boys who dream of becoming legendary princes dressed in crimson cloth.

Zineb made a horrible face at me, I made an even more horrible one at her. She started screaming, to alert the whole neighborhood:

- Mom! Mom! Sidi Mohammed is making faces at me. I tried to defend myself.
- She started it! She did!

No one believed me. I burst into tears. Furious, my mother grabbed me roughly by the arm and dragged me to our room. She complained loudly about her bad fate, the cruelty of fate, the hellish life she was leading because of me.

I sincerely wondered what I was doing that was so bad to make her so unhappy. She abandoned me in a corner, let me sniff at my leisure, my heart heavy, my lips pouting, and locked herself in her kitchen. I was hungry from crying silently. Besides, lunchtime had long since passed. I rolled onto my back and began to compose a sumptuous menu for the day when, as a recognized and beloved prince, I would have to receive people of my rank. I thought for a moment and said to myself:

"Princes eat very well at home. I will not invite them. My guests will be all the hungry, the beggars, the psalmists who rarely eat a good meal. I will distribute beautiful clothes to them: richly decorated red waistcoats, milk-white djellabas, saffron slippers whose leather creaks with every step. I will not forget to offer them muslin turbans. I will be dressed in white. On my head, I will wear the conical bonnet, of an amaranth red, the prerogative of courtiers and dervishes. Black slaves will serve us in porcelain dishes of the ...

- Would you like to sit up and eat?

I straightened up. My mother had set the round table, low on legs. Meat with turnips! I didn't like turnips! I thought about refusing this meal. My mother was unhappy enough as it was. I would have triggered a new crisis, I didn't feel up to it. I did honor to the meal. The hunger that devoured me transformed the taste of the turnip into an exquisite flavor.

Someone on the terrace began to sing. Scraps of a cantilena, softly swaying in the breath of the nascent spring, reached us. My mother stopped chewing and listened.

The voice faded away. A moment later, it burst into a jet of light, warm, intoxicating and nostalgic like a puff of incense.

My mother went to lean out of the window. She called

- Fatma Bziouya, do you know who sings like that?
- Lalla Khadija, uncle Othman's wife.
- I don't understand why she is so cheerful when she married an old man who could be her father.
- She is not unhappy! Uncle Othman does his bidding. He treats her like his daughter.
- And she? How does she treat him? Our neighbors burst out laughing.
- I know how she treats him. Old M'Barka, the former slave of Uncle Othman, told me told a very amusing story. It is too long for me to repeat it to you, replied Rahma.
- Tell it, tell it, all the women asked with one voice.

Rahma made herself be asked for a moment. Then she began:

- You know Uncle Othman, a man who has seen better times. His parents left him a large fortune when they died. He had a dissipated youth and ate up capital and profits. All he had left was the small house that leans against ours. Faithful, M'Barka shared good and bad fortune. If Othman had married several times, but none of his successive wives had really managed to conquer him. Lalla Khadija alone succeeded in dominating him, in making him eat out of the palm of her hand, like

a lamb. It is true that Khadija, if she has no fortune, at least possesses youth and charm.

Wait, I'm getting to my story.

I went to lean out of the window beside my mother. All the women had abandoned their work and were leaning on the railings and balustrades of their balconies. Lalla Kanza took out an old prayer rug and sat down to listen in the patio.

Rahma, of whom only the bust was visible, resumed the thread of her story.

We were all eager to know what happened next.

- Si Othman went out early last Friday to do his shopping. He was swinging his shopping bag cheerfully, greeting some with his hand on his heart, giving broad smiles to others. Because he knows all the people in the neighborhood. He arrived in Joutyia. Only one merchant, a meat merchant, was open. Needless to say, there was a crowd around his shop. It was Salem the Negro. He brandished sometimes an impressive axe, sometimes a phenomenal cutlass. He was cutting up large quarters of mutton that disappeared into the baskets and shopping bags of the customers. It was crowded, I tell you. People were happily crushing each other's feet, politely exchanging slaps and venomous words. If Othman, to attract the attention of Salem the Negro, waved both arms, spread a broad smile on his face, shouted a series of words that could mean: "Swallow your cutlass" or "you deserve to be beaten" or, more simply, "give me a leg of lamb." The furious Negro threatened him from afar with his axe and continued his work.

Everyone was laughing until they cried. Rahma knew how to tell stories so well. She continued, happy with her success:

If Othman started his game again a moment later. Salem bared his teeth, raised his axe high, hesitated between the desire to send it to the head of this unpleasant customer and the duty to continue to serve his world. Duty prevailed, to Si Othman's great relief. A dog, as there always are near butcher shops, came to sniff at Si Othman's heels. The latter, impatient, gave it a big kick. His slipper jumped. The dog seized it, grabbed it between its fangs and ran away. Si Othman followed him, limping along.

We were all laughing again and Rahma had to stop for a moment before continuing.

- He managed to get his slipper back in the vicinity of the Bin Lemdoun bridge. Back in Joutyia, he noticed that there was no longer anyone in front of the butcher's shop. The Negro was dozing, his chechia on his ear, his fly swatter between his fingers. On the hooks of the shop hung large pieces of mou for the cats. He also noticed that all the vegetable sellers were sleeping in the middle of empty crates or behind their stalls where three bunches of radishes were turning yellow. If Othman did not dare to return empty-handed, God alone knows how Lalla Khadija would have received him. In a fondouk, he discovered a very curious sight.

People were conscientiously stamping their feet. Shad were born from this eddy, floated above their heads for a moment and disappeared. Si Othman, full of good will, waited a long time, hoping for a miracle. As the miracle was slow, the itching in his nose became intolerable. He left the market to go to the nearest tobacconist. He hoped to send a good catch up his nostrils. Perhaps he had lingered a little at the tobacconist's. When he returned, there were no more fish and no more buyers.

The women were screaming with joy. I was stamping my feet with enthusiasm. I was demanding the next part.

- Go on! Go on! my mother said. Rahma continued.

- Si Othman became angry; people heard him shouting insults. He brandished his fists and said: "The cursed old man! Did I need to listen to the story of his marriage, to this cuckold? Why did he tell me about his sister's death and what have I to do with his daughter's engagement!" Finally Si Othman turned back. At the mint merchant's at the small crossroads of Sagha Street, he stopped in front of a magnificent rose. He thought that if he offered it to Lala Khadija, she would forgive him for not doing anything

bring back something edible. I was in the street when he entered his house, proud of his beautiful rose that was fragrant and I witnessed the outcome with my own eyes. He entered, then the door opened again almost immediately, the rose crushed under his feet, then, Si Othman's turban came to join it followed by a pale and defeated Si Othman. He picked up his hat, took the rose which he inhaled deeply and, seeing me there staring at him, he gave me a broad smile.

We laughed until we were dying. Rahma finished like this:

- The rose, the turban and the attitude of Si Othman intrigued me and I asked M'Barka what was
When I arrived, I learned how Lalla Khadija treated her old husband.

Everyone complimented Rahma on her way of painting the most insignificant events. These words had "salt".

Rahma's story haunted me all evening, and I still dreamed about it at night.

Chapter VII

The WOMEN of the house all bought themselves tambourines, bendirs and tambourines. Each of these instruments had its own shape, its own particular language. There were long ones in blue ceramic, the base covered with parchment, pottery bellies of an almost rustic nature, simple circular wooden frames covered with carefully depilated goatskin.

My mother bought one of these drums or bendirs. She tried it out. Deep blows and blows dry combined with art spoke a harsh dialect, a mixture of sun and high mountain wind.

Two more days before Ashura, the great day when, from each terrace in the afternoon, will rise rhythms and songs.

Now each of our neighbors was practicing her scales, playing a dance tune for herself, accompanied by flourishes, words murmured in a low voice. Zineb was banging like a deaf person on a tiny, cheap tambourine. The day before, my father had given me a very crude trumpet made of tin, all variegated with colors. From time to time I would get a nasal whine out of it that ended in a hoarse cry of an angry wild animal. I was counting on other toys for the very day of Ashura.

I wanted a clay drum, shaped like an hourglass, and a rattle decorated with flowers. For the moment I was content with my trumpet. It burst forth amid all the noises of the house like a cry of alarm, sometimes like a dying sob.

My mother asked me to go up to the terrace and bray at my leisure.

All over the city, women were trying out their tambourines. A dull hum filled the air.

I puffed out my cheeks and blew with all my might into my long trumpet; the sound choked and I had the impression of hearing a baby cutting its first teeth. Zineb's cat was dozing in the sun. He jumped in fright, almost lost his balance, and fell from the top of the wall, his favorite home. He left me on the terrace and rushed into a gutter.

A worried head emerged from the top of a shared wall and disappeared. My mother was already calling me back. I went down-say to join her.

- One of your friends, sent by the schoolmaster, is waiting for you in the patio, she said to me. Take your ba-mouh and go join him; the fqih needs you.

I reluctantly left my trumpet behind and rushed down the stairs to find my classmate. It was Hammoussa, chickpea, the shortest student in the school. His real name was Azzouz Berrada. He told me to hurry.

The equipment of the chandeliers for the night of Ashura required the help of all hands. It was necessary

come to work like the others instead of playing the trumpet. We arrived at the MI/d. I kissed the Master's hand and sat down in the middle of a group charged with cutting tiny strands from a square of old white cotton, worn to the limit of wear. Other students took hold of the carefully rolled strands and stapled them in the middle to a strip of tin. The free end of the metal strip formed a hook and had to rest on the edge of a glass filled half with water and half with olive oil.

The big ones, suspended from a rickety ladder, hung wrought iron chandeliers from the window awnings and the ceiling of the school room. Of very simple design, these chandeliers were formed of one or more hoops connected together by rigid rods. Narrow circles were glued to these hoops in which the small night lights would be housed: ordinary glasses with a wick that swam in oil.

To achieve a nice effect, the students mixed powders of various colors with the water in the night lights.

When I arrived, the chandeliers were far from being fully furnished. The glasses were piled up in a bucket, the colored powders in small packets lay in the slippers of the fqih and the tin strips were lying everywhere on the mats. We worked actively. Hammoussa cut his thumb on a strip and went home to be treated, whimpering softly.

Most of the students worked hard; only five or six of the most unruly went from one group to another, moving in all directions, provoking here and there a few disputes.

Our task was completed before sunset. Before leaving the school, we sang hymns in honor of the Prophet, recited in chorus some verses of the Koran. The Master fervently pronounced invocations to draw blessings upon us, upon our parents and upon the entire Muslim community. He did not forget, in his prayers, the Sultan, Prince of the Believers, may Allah prolong his existence and help him to bear the heavy burden of the kingdom.

We stood in silence waiting for the Master to signal us to leave. My turn came rather quickly. I kissed the Master's hand, put on my slippers and went out.

At home, I found my mother very upset. There was no more oil in the lamp. My mother had forgotten to buy some. I offered to do her errand. She refused. Driss El Aouad came home. My mother went downstairs. I heard him whispering on Rahma's landing. Driss El Aouad's footsteps echoed again on the stairs. He had agreed to do my mother a favor.

From the street came the shrill voice of a candle seller. "Candles and matches," he shouted. We no longer used candles. It was good for poor people, without money, those who could not afford a beautiful lamp with a glass to reflect the light, good also for backward people who fear explosions, smoke and bad smell, so many inconveniences that exist only in their imagination.

Night fell suddenly. We waited impatiently for our neighbor to return to light the room. Someone coughed at the front door of the house. Driss El Aouad asked if there was anyone in his way. My mother rushed to Rahma's house, brought back her half-full bottle of oil. By the light of a candle stub, she unscrewed the nozzle, filled the lamp, cleaned the wick of its coal and lit it.

- Blessing evening, I told him.
- May your evening be blessed, my mother replied.
- Lalla Zoubida, called Lalla Kanza from the ground floor, blessed be your evening, could you give me a sprig of mint?
- Sidi Mohammed will bring it to you.

My mother gave me some branches of very fragrant mint. I proudly went to offer them to the chouafa. I found her in the patio. An odor of incense, benzoin, and many other aromatics weighed down the atmosphere. I was convinced that an assembly of demons, attracted by all these odors, was standing in the darkness.

Lalla Kanza, to thank me, put a handful of sesame seeds in the palm of my hand. I thought it was part of a mysterious meal offered to the genies by the witch. I tasted it with the tip of my tongue. The sesame taste was not suspicious. I ate it. The seeds stuck around my lips and on the tip of my nose. My tongue swept away what it could reach. I dusted off the excess with my fingers.

It was dark on the stairs, but the darkness did not scare me. The void that opened before me was empty only in appearance. Mute presences moved aside to let me pass. When I am old enough, all these presences will reveal themselves to my seeing eyes.

I heard my mother say solemnly:

- God is the greatest.

Someone asked:

- Is that the muezzin announcing the Achaa prayer that I hear?

- Yes, my mother answered.

In the dark, I held my breath, listening attentively.

I did not hear a muezzin. Women, they say, have sharper ears than men.

My father soon arrived. Dinner proceeded as usual.

Before we went to bed, my father told me of his intention to take me the next morning to walk around the souks and choose my toys. We would also go to Bab Moulay Idriss to buy a candle. On the night of Ashura, I would offer it to the schoolmaster.

I was happy. Only one thing bothered me. I knew that it was impossible for me to escape the hairdresser's session. My father would not fail to take me to Chemaïne to the narrow shop of Si Abderrahman, the barber. I liked neither Si Abderrahman nor his shop.

I lay down, but sleep had fled my eyelids. I dreamed for a long time of monumental candles, decorated with paper lace finely pierced by a patient hand, of sparkling razors, of hourglass-shaped drums, of wrought-iron chandeliers loaded with crystal cups.

My father knew nothing of the delicate art of buying and selling. He was ignorant of the subtleties of haggling and the pleasure of obtaining an object a penny cheaper than the neighbor paid for it. After the morning meal, he took me to visit the toy merchants. In each street resounded the tambourines, the bells of tin rattles, the song of flutes. The tambourine merchants were bustling about in their stalls, which had become cramped because they were piled up with merchandise. Tambourines, bendirs, tambourines, trumpets and pipes hung in clusters, piled up in multi-colored heaps, and invaded the shelves. A crowd of women, mature men, little girls and boys formed a circle around each shop. Some were trying out an instrument, others were accompanying them with hand clapping, chattering, demanding, discussing with the merchant who no longer knew which way to turn.

A crowd of country people, coming down from their distant villages, were stocking up on sugar, spices, cottons and musical instruments. They cluttered the street with their packages.

I clung to my father's hand as he pushed aside passers-by to clear a path for us. I had my hourglass drum, a weird little wooden cart and a new trumpet.

My father let me choose, paid without arguing. I gave him long speeches, asked him a thousand questions to which he rarely answered. He smiled to see me so excited. We finished our shopping by buying a candle, a pound of weight. Bab Moulay Idriss Street opens into the district of embroidered belt manufacturers and dried fruit sellers.

Near a century-old vine, the shop of Si Abderrahman the hairdresser opened. Maalem Bnou Achir occupied the shop opposite him. Each had his clientele. The two barbers ignored the competition.

My father used to come and have his hair shaved since he moved to Fez, in the shop of Si Abder-rahman.

Barbers take part in many family ceremonies. When I was born, my father, a mountaineer transplanted to the big city, nevertheless wanted to celebrate my arrival in the world in a fitting manner. Si Abderrahman gave him excellent advice. He came, as was customary, accompanied by his two apprentices, to seat the guests and serve during the meal.

When I first got my hair cut, my father used his care and still made a big deal of his opinions and recommendations.

I didn't like Si Abderrahman. I knew he would be in charge of circumcising me. I dreaded that day. I felt shivers run through my skin when I saw him handle the razor or the scissors.

We found him busy performing a bloodletting. The client presented his shaved neck, Si Abderrahman leaned over the patient's neck. I looked away from this spectacle.

If Abderrahman planted two tin suction cups behind the stranger's head and wished us a happy day in polite terms.

- I see, he said, that this young man has been spoiled: a drum, a trumpet, a magnificent chariot and a candle. It is true that the candle is intended for the fqih. One must always be very good to one's master, otherwise, beware of the quince stick.

Everyone laughed. I blushed with indignation. The quince wand is not at all laughable. These gentlemen had never received it on the soles of their feet, to the point of not being able to stand. They could laugh. The quince wand inspires in those who know it a feeling of fear and respect.

A thin man with a goatee beard and a monumental turban lifted the entrance curtain. He moaned as much as he could. As a greeting, he contented himself with nodding his head in an affirmative movement. He collapsed between the armrests of a rigid chair and continued to moan.

- You still seem very tired, Uncle Hammad! Can I help you?

- If Abderrahman, I will die.

- Do not utter such words unworthy of a Muslim.

Allah alone knows the secrets of life and death. What are you suffering from?

- I don't suffer. Only, at night, my breathing becomes short, I suffocate and my heart swells with anguish.

- You need a tonic, Uncle Hammad. I know a very effective recipe. Can you remember it?

- My memory is intact; it is my heart, I tell you, that is failing.

Give me that recipe quickly.

- It is simple. Ask the people of your house to fry in butter a finely chopped white onion. Mix with this fried onion two spoonfuls of honey, anise and sesame seeds, add ginger and cinnamon, perfume the whole with three cloves. If you absorb a mouthful every morning of this remedy, your discomforts will disappear.

- If Abderrahman, God will reward you, on the day of judgment; I knew that your wisdom would be of great help to me. I am going to buy the ingredients, on time and at once.

Uncle Hammad sighed, fidgeted, finally got out of his seat and left, uttering muffled groans.
sessions.

If Abderrahman checked the adhesion of the suction cups he had placed on the back of his mysterious client's neck.

- Today, my assistant is absent and the apprentice is in prison, for some misdeed; I am alone working, explained Si Abderrahman.

He continued, addressing my father:

- I hope, Maalem Abdeslem, that you have nothing very important to do, I have a while to perform this bloodletting. I performed one yesterday on one of your friends, Moulay Larbi Alaoui, the babouchier. I like this man. Always dignified, sober in words and gestures. What surprises me is that he has no children. Perhaps his wife is too old? The people in your house must know Moulay Larbi's wife. They say she is a Cherifa with a generous heart. Thanks to her help, Moulay Larbi was able to pay his debts and re-establish his workshop. I know that his business is now very prosperous.

My father listened, indifferent. Abderrahman smoothed a razor, leaned over the patient's neck with suction cups, put away small objects in a drawer.

Sitting on the bench between two turned wooden armrests, my feet dangling in the air, I looked at the worn mat that covered the wall, the array of razors and hand mirrors, I admired the majestic Mary's chair painted in faded colors.

Already if Abderrahman resumed his monologue.

- Don't you think he should think about taking a new wife? The time may not yet have come, but I am sure that Moulay Larbi's business will improve. He makes excellent women's slippers, of a truly astonishing richness of material, decoration and colour. These articles always enjoy great favour with the female clientele. Only women can make the fortune of some or the ruin of others. It seems that in some countries, women even go to the hairdresser to have their hair fixed. If only I had been born in one of these fabulous countries!

If Abderrahman exhaled a long sigh of regret and continued:

- I have no right to complain, I am the hairdresser of several families, of our high society. They are generous. God will reward them. Praise be to God.

A new visitor entered.

- Greetings to you! he said.

- Upon you the salvation, mercy and blessing of Allah! replied Si Abderrahman.

My father moved his lips, the cupping customer coughed three times, spat somewhere and froze. in his rigid pose:

He had his back to us. I could see the fringes of his beard sticking out to the side. His cherry-red ears looked like strange flowers. He must have been quite old and, judging by the colour of his neck, he was working in the fields or in one of the many gardens surrounding Fez. He ceased to interest me. I looked at the newcomer again. Young, with skin as white as wax, full eyebrows and a beard blacker than a crow's wing, his face radiated gentleness.

He took his place on a sort of fairly high platform facing the door of the shop. Si Abder-rahman, while attending to mysterious tasks, did not cease to lavish him with smiles and kind words. When the young man had settled down, the barber gave one or two neighs to show his joy and began the conversation.

- How is your venerable father, Sidi Ahmed? (God keep him in perfect health and multiply his wealth!) Is he still suffering from his knee? It is better! I am very happy! I am very happy, very happy! My ointment must have worked. It even worked beyond my expectations. And you, my son? Let me congratulate you, wish you happiness and joy. Yes, I already know. I know little in truth. Your father sometimes talks to me about you, he announced the happy event to me. You are marrying the daughter of Si Omar the notary.

During this entire monologue, the man named Si Ahmed opened his mouth several times, tried to place a word but if Abderrahman guessed his answers and saved him the trouble of formulating them.

The barber continued:

- If Omar is a man of God. In an era where corruption, injustice, greed are rampant, it is a blessing from Allah to meet a man like Si Omar, or like your revered father Haj Ali.

He turned to my father to inform him:

- Sidi Ahmed is the son of El Haj Ali Lamrani, the tea merchant of the Sagha district. You must know him.

- Yes! Yes! You must know him, he made the pilgrimage to the Holy Places three times. Three times, he touched the Black Stone. I pray God to grant me the favor of being in Paradise the neighbor of such a pious man! Sidi Ahmed is going to marry the daughter of Si Omar the notary. If Omar possesses, in addition to knowledge, wisdom and courtesy, material goods; God will increase his fortune.

He addressed Sidi Ahmed.

- What's happening with your studies? I knew you as a baby, now you're a scholar!

- I am only a beggar of science, said Sidi Ahmed finally.

He placed this sentence by surprise. If Abderrahman sucked the mouthpiece of one of his suction cups. He added, still taking advantage of the barber's forced silence:

- Yes Abderrahman, you certainly know more than me about my management. My parents take care of of this matter. I have no say in it.

- Since when, replied the barber, do young people have a say in these serious problems? They sometimes have education, but an education gleaned from books and from the lips of their masters. They lack the experience of mature people, points of comparison, the knowledge of men. Getting married does not consist in spending charming evenings with a young and pretty woman, getting married means creating new ties of kinship with another family, having beautiful children capable of coming to your aid in our old age. I have a daughter of marriageable age. My future son-in-law will be a little

my son, I who have always wanted a son.

If Abderrahman removed the suction cups, went to empty them behind a curtain. On the back of the customer's neck appeared two bloody swellings. The barber hastened to fill them with cotton and came towards me.

- I'll start with this child who must be bored. He would probably prefer to be on the street.

As he wrapped me in a large red and yellow striped towel, he continued:

- I understand it! The street! The street, with the crowd and its smells, the crowd and its calls, the crowd and its murmurs, its songs, its lamentations, its disputes and its children's cries, the street with its squares shaded by vines and plane trees, the street that dreams, that sings and that sulks...

Now he was soaping my head and rubbing it with the flat of both hands. His gaze was vague. He resumed his hymn to the street.

- The street where the little gray donkey trots, where the skinny cats wander, where flocks of sparrows whirl, the street that a pair of pigeons with iridescent plumage crosses with dignity, this street with its festive processions and funeral processions reserves its most tender smiles for its lovers, envelops them in the warmth of a maternal breast, adorns itself for them alone with delicate colors and rare lights.

- You are a poet, Si Abderrahman! cried Sidi Ahmed. By Allah! I have never read anything so beautiful on the street.

- How can I be a poet when I can barely read and write? No, I just love our good city of Fez. The street for me is a perpetual spectacle.

- You know how to talk about it nicely, said my father.

- Yes Abdeslem, we always bet on things we like.

A common terracotta jug can arouse the enthusiasm of a jug lover and transform him into what Sidi Ahmed calls a poet.

If Abderrahman chose a razor with an ebony handle, passed it, ironed it again on a sticky stone of oil, wiped it off carefully, tried again on his nail before starting to shave my head.

He started at the top of my head, forced my nose down to my knees, and gently scraped the down from the back of my neck. Then he came back to the sides, and went around the lock of hair hanging over my right ear. The razor burned me a little. I said nothing. I didn't even listen to the conversation anymore. A torpor came over me. I finally fell asleep. My head went sideways and the blade bit me slightly. I woke up with a start. The barber was still talking. Beads of sweat covered my forehead, trickled down my nose.

He finally stopped, dusted my face and neck with a towel and unwrapped me. I felt light, as if I had bled white. My heart ached. I looked around for my father. He noticed my discomfort, stood up and came to my aid.

- Come, he said to me, the fresh air will do you good. Yes Abderrahman, I need to be shaved too, but I will come back in the evening; this child seems tired. Gentlemen, I leave you in the peace of Allah!

Here we are again in the street; never has it seemed so beautiful, so enchanting to me as that day. I felt much better. When we got home, we sat down to eat. The sound of tambourines reached us from all the terraces.

On the first floor, Zineb was tapping rhythmlessly on her four-cent toy, a terracotta tarifa that was no more than a span long. I barely had time to eat, I was eager to kill her with

jealousy. I found two sticks, slung the hourglass-shaped drum over my shoulder and began a nouba of my own composition that would burst the eardrums of all the inhabitants of the neighborhood.

I thought. My music had to be richer. I equipped myself as a one-man band. I sat down, put my drum on the ground on its edges, I managed to wedge my trumpet between my knees. My hands shaped the stick vigorously. I blew with all my strength into the trumpet. Drum noises and bellows mingled. The music became deafening. Zineb came to join me to take part in the party. We improvised the most beautiful concert that had ever made the walls of our house resonate.

The women, including my mother, cried for mercy. They did not appreciate our music. They advised to climb up to the terrace belvedere to charm the ears of the neighbors.

Before that my mother asked me to take off my djellaba and my old vest. She wanted to try on a new shirt. She put it on over the old one. It was cracking with priming.

My mother seemed pleased with the seamstress's work. The shirt covered me completely and fell to the ground. My arms were lost in the immense sleeves. The collar, two fingers high, was made of several layers of fabric and closed on the side with a white silk cord.

I was only thinking about my drum, this fitting session bored me. I was able to free myself, take back my old vest and my djellaba. I ran towards the terrace. Zineb was waiting for me in the company of two girls and a boy who had come from the adjoining houses, each with his musical instrument. The boy was holding a tambourine like the girls. He left it to grab my trumpet. He was older than me and knew music. He knew how to draw from this trumpet, simple in appearance, the most unexpected roars. We abandoned ourselves to the joy of rhythm, we got drunk on noise.

Richly dressed women perched on the walls to admire us. They laughed at our excitement, encouraged us with kind words that were lost in the din.

We played until sunset. My mother came to get me. According to her, I had had enough fun that evening. I had to come and have dinner and go to bed. She planned to wake me up first thing in the morning to go to the Msid to start the year in joy, work and the recitation of sacred verses. She took me to the kitchen. There, the wooden trough that was used on laundry days was overflowing with boiling water. To make this water less hot, she poured a bucket of cold water into it. She undressed me, plunged me into this clever mixture. I was short of breath. I began to scream, to struggle in order to escape from my mother's hands who was rubbing me vigorously with a cork disc, imprisoned in a particularly rough fabric. Once washed, I ate a few mouthfuls of bread dipped in the sauce of a meat dish with lemon. I lay down on my mattress. My mother spread a warm blanket over me. It wasn't long before I was plunged into darkness, a darkness populated by teasing, silly little girls and talkative barbers.

My mother's voice pulled me from the depths of sleep. I swam for a while in a red light filled with sparks and wandering stars, then I opened my eyes. Quickly, I closed them again, hoping to find the darkness so restful and so fresh again. The voice insisted:

- Wake up, it's three in the morning. I've got your nice vest, your new shirt and your bag ready for you. You haven't seen your beautiful embroidered bag yet. Open your eyes! Wake up!

I whimpered, rubbing my eyelids vigorously with my closed fists. I tried several times to lie down again, but my mother was merciless. She wet her hand and passed it over my face. My ears stopped ringing. I cautiously opened my eyelashes. My father, dressed in a fine wool djellaba, smiled at me.

- Get ready to celebrate Ashura at Msid with your comrades. Courage! Courage!

It was in a sleepwalking state that I washed my eyes, rinsed my mouth, refreshed my

members. I regained my lucidity 'when' my mother put my new shirt on me, crisp with preparation, right next to my skin. It scratched me horribly. With each movement, I filled the room with the sound of crumpled paper. I put on my red vest with its complicated and highly embossed designs. With my satchel slung over my shoulder, I completed this very elegant ensemble with the white djellaba that was sleeping at the bottom of my mother's trunk. It smelled of orange blossom and dried rose.

Here I am, a different man! I was wide awake. I was eager to go to school. The clothes, the shoes, everything was new. Full of dignity and confidence, I preceded my father up the stairs.

The light shone in all the windows of the house. Men and women began the year in activity. Those who stayed in bed on a morning like this would feel, for twelve months, indolent, lazy.

A beggar's call came to us from the street. I heard the sound of his cane. He was surely a blind man.

I lost my slippers every three steps. My parents thought big. Neither clothes nor shoes sure weren't my size. But I was happy.

Once in the street, my father slipped a five-franc coin into my hand and put the candle we had bought in my arms. These were my New Year's presents for the schoolmaster.

The passers-by we met smiled at me kindly. The shops were open, the streets lit. I made terrible efforts to hold on to my slippers. From a distance, I saw the awning windows of our school.

I almost dropped my candle in enthusiasm. Clusters of light hung down and transformed this usually sad and dusty façade into a fairy-tale setting. The oil lamps, variously colored, sparkled and by their very presence created a refined atmosphere of celebration and joy.

I quickened my pace. The students' voices rose clear in the cool of the morning. They competed in gaiety with the dozens of small flames dancing in their bath of oil and water tinted with the colors of the rainbow. This impression of a fabulous party was accentuated when I pushed open the door of the Msid. I was no longer the only prince in the amaranth-coloured cloth waistcoat; I had become a member of a congregation of young lords, all richly dressed, singing, under the direction of a legendary king, hymns of joy and thanksgiving.

My father left me in the middle of my classmates. I solemnly handed over my one-pound candle and my five-franc piece. The children huddled together to make room for me.

I chanted the verses of the Koran with conviction. Other students arrived. The bundle of candles grew bigger next to the fqih. The heat was becoming stifling. I had my head covered with the hood of my djellaba. I threw it back. My shirt stuck to my body. Unbearable tingling ran down my back. My forehead and hands were covered in beads of sweat. One of the students had a nosebleed and stained his beautiful clothes with red scabs. I looked up at the ceiling. The small flames danced, crackled, sometimes throwing a blue spark. I kept quiet to hear them chant the word of God like us. Their voices merged with those of the students. I was convinced that none of them celebrated the silent Ashura in their glass cage, indifferent to the waves of happiness that washed over our faces.

This morning, the most ordinary objects, the most deprived beings mingled their voices with ours, felt the same fervor, abandoned themselves to the same ecstasy, proclaimed with the same gravity as us, the greatness and mercy of God, creator of all living things.

After the recitation of the Quran, we sang hymns. The parents of some students chanted with us. They had come to accompany their children. They perhaps had no work waiting for them: they were celebrating Ashura at the Msid as in their childhood.

The light from the night lights was turning yellow, growing dimmer as day approached. In the street, the traffic had become intense. Two sparrows fluttered around the chandeliers hanging from the window awnings.

The master, his eyes on the ceiling, his two hands open in a gesture of offering, pronounced long invocations. He asked Allah to protect and prosper the affairs of the Muslim community, to extend his graces to the living and the dead, to develop the bonds of solidarity between humans, to make order, justice and compassion reign on this earth.

Amine! Amine!

It was the first time I had seen the fqih without a quince stick. He seemed handsome to me, wrapped in his black and white striped djellaba, his shoulders covered with a gray cloth burnous. He gave us three days of rest. Since the first day of school was a Thursday, the vacation would last four days. I kissed the fqih's hand before returning home. He asked me to present his wishes for the new year to my parents and recited a few invocations on their behalf.

The street was now very lively. Almost all the passers-by had dressed in new clothes. Some were returning from the market laden with baskets of esparto grass which they kept aside so as not to dirty their beautiful belongings, others were strolling idle. My mother had taken out a beautiful mansouria in fine veil, decorated with stripes of yellow satin. She had put on a black scarf with long multicoloured fringes.

The kettle was singing. My parents were waiting for me to come back for lunch.

My mother had cooked a stack of square puff pastry pancakes. She smeared them with fresh butter and honey. They were delicious. I had two large glasses of mint tea.

During the meal, my parents set out a schedule for the day. In the morning, my father proposed to take me to Moulay Idriss, the patron saint of the city. After the communal prayer, we would return for lunch. In the afternoon, I would accompany my mother to our friend Lalla Aicha. I would be allowed to take one of my trumpets with me; the fragile pottery drum risked breaking on the way.

My lucky star decided otherwise. After wandering with my father through the streets crowded with passers-by, after having acquired a blue ceramic dish on the notaries' square where the potters were exhibiting their production that day, we entered the sanctuary of Moulay Idriss. There, we performed the rites of the *Louli* prayer and we went to lunch.

Lalla Aicha came to surprise us at the end of the meal. My mother showed great joy at seeing her again. The two women showered each other with pointed kisses, polite phrases and kind words. My father left them to their effusions and disappeared.

I had a mad desire to play the drum, to bellow a few times with my trumpet, but I knew that my mother would not tolerate such excesses. I abstained. I waited until evening to give myself body and soul to the music. I stayed in a corner to listen to the words of our visitor. She let it be known as soon as she arrived that she had a lot to tell. My mother had all the time in the world and was quivering with curiosity. She did not forget, in spite of everything, to fulfill her duties as hostess. She blew on the embers, added a bowl of water to the kettle, rinsed the glasses. She opened a tin can and took out half a dozen semolina cakes.

- Lalla Aicha, sit on the big couch; the tea will be ready soon. No! No! I said on the big couch. Sofa, in the place of honor! I beg you, make yourself comfortable, insisted my mother.

Lalla Aicha collapsed among the cushions, sighed with satisfaction and began her story. It was not

In truth, a story, but a series of events attached to each other. Sometimes, the facts became so complicated that Lalla Aïcha herself no longer knew where she was. At these moments, her face became troubled, a sort of anguish tensed her features, her eyes betrayed a deep worry, but soon a broad smile came to dispel the storm and Lalla Aïcha resumed her monologue.

My mother suffered the same torments, shared in the same joys, felt the same emotions as her friend. She sometimes opened her mouth as if to come to her aid but, not finding the right word, said nothing.

Some passages in this long web of insignificant anecdotes transported me with pleasure. Lalla Aïcha related that in the house next to hers all the women, by a whim of chance, were called Khadija.

To differentiate them, the husband's profession was specified: Khadija, the grocer's wife, Khadija, the tailor's wife, Khadija, the oil merchant's wife.

Lalla Aïcha added:

- It would be easier to call them Khadija the deaf, Khadija the cross-eyed, Khadija the black, everyone would understand who they are.

We laughed heartily at this joke. My mother left for a few minutes. She came back with a bouquet of sage and absinthe. She began to make her special day tea. While pouring the boiling water into the teapot, she questioned Lalla Aïcha.

- How is your man? Tell me about his business. Does he have a partner again? Does he work alone?

- He has no partner, but he does not work alone. He employs three workers. The slippers sell well and I have no right to complain. He promised to buy me, at the beginning of winter, an apricot cloth caftan, an object I have wanted for so long.

- Praise be to God! Difficulties always end up being smoothed out and miseries falling into oblivion.

- Yes! sighed Lalla Aïcha.

My mother waited for further explanations, but suddenly her friend fell silent. This worried her.

- What are you thinking about, Lalla Aïcha? You seem sad. I hope everything is going according to your wishes in your household.

Lalla Aïcha sighed without saying anything. My mother poured herself a glass of tea and tasted it. She seemed satisfied-done. She served her guest and served me.

Lalla Aïcha finally spoke. She leaned over my mother and whispered in a low voice:

- We women are very weak creatures. God alone is our support and our mandataire. Let us be careful not to trust men. They are... They are...

Lalla Aïcha did not find the right epithet, she simply waved her hands at shoulder height and raised her eyes to the sky.

My mother allowed me to go up onto the terrace to play the drum. I understood that the two women had secrets to share and were afraid of my prying ears. I was delighted with the opportunity. I went up onto the terrace. Alone in this vast universe, I gave myself over to the joys of rhythm. I invented the most barbaric combinations. I tapped the two parchment sides of my pottery hourglass, with one

angry wand. The walls multiplied the sounds.

Meanwhile, Lalla Aicha and my mother, leaning over each other, were chatting, chatting, chatting!...

In the evening, bouquets of richly dressed women adorned all the terraces. The tambourines resounded, songs burst forth from everywhere. The sun in a golden robe lingered on the horizon, bathing the whole city in faded pink and delicate mauve. The first star blinked. That was the signal. Lalla Aicha kissed my mother and left.

The oil lamp was lit. We were listless. My drum and trumpet lay on a mattress. I was disgusted by it. I found my old clothes with pleasure. Of my new clothes, I kept only the shirt; thanks to the heat of my body, its fabric had become humanized.

To escape the sound of the drums that was still buzzing in my skull, I opened my Box. Wonders. My eyes, alas, no longer had the strength to look.

Chapter VIII

After the days of Ashura celebration, life resumed its normal course, that is to say, fell back into its grayness, found its monotony. The heat began to rage. Colonies of flies invaded the house, filled it with their buzzing, decorated it with their droppings. The bedbugs that were sleeping in the old woodwork made their appearance. They were poor bedbugs exhausted by fasting and the cold of winter. They were dusty brown and completely flat, as if drained of blood.

When we moved into this room, their tribe was enjoying great prosperity. My mother declared total war on them. She used all means to overcome them. She employed brutal methods: quicklime, sulfur, petroleum, used more underhanded practices, talismans, various powders bought from a miracle worker, invocations. Only a few families had resisted the massacre. Their degenerate limbs dragged a pitiful existence along the rafters and joists of our ceiling. They no longer reproduced, and when one of them inadvertently ventured far from the heights, it knew it was doomed. To come within reach of man's fingers was a form of suicide, a way like any other to end it all, to flee this world and its miseries as quickly as possible.

However, the flies were flourishing day by day. Every morning, my mother chased them away with a great blow of a cloth. They came out of the window with angry buzzing. With the curtain unfolded, we were sheltered from these unpleasant creatures. A few more cunning ones continued to make rounds in the darkness of the room.

On the first hot day, my mother took off the rush mat, rolled it up and hid it behind the bed.

The mattresses lay directly on the floor, which had been washed with plenty of water.

The days became long. The Msid room, considered too hot and too narrow, was abandoned. One morning we moved our writing boards and inkwells and the school was set up in a small sanctuary two steps away. This mausoleum housed the tomb of a saint. The people of the neighborhood did not know his name, but young girls who wanted to marry during the year came on Thursdays to walk around the tomb seven times. Other people were buried in this large room with a heavenly freshness.

A niche in a corner indicated the direction of the East. From the first day, at the call of the muezzin, the fqih imposed silence on us. He sent us to perform our ablutions at the small circular fountain that hummed in a corner. Young and old, lined up behind our master, we solemnly performed the duty of every good Muslim: ritual prayer. Twice a day, throughout the summer, the same ceremonies took place.

The change of scenery, the soft light falling from the side openings, a certain benevolence on the face of the fqih had a very happy effect on my health, physical and moral. I began to love school. My memory worked miracles. From ten lines on my board, I went to fifteen. I had no difficulty in learning them.

One Friday, my father, full of pride, told my mother about the conversation he had had the day before with

my master met in the street. The fqih had assured him that, if I continued to work with as much heart and enthusiasm, I would one day become a scholar of whom he could be very proud.

Of course, that was not my goal. The learned word evoked for me the image of an obese man with a very broad face fringed with a beard, in loose white clothes, and a monumental turban. I had no desire to resemble such a man.

I learned my lesson every day because it seemed to me that my parents loved me more for it and above all I avoided the encounter with the nagging quince wand. I had drawn up a vague program for myself: until lunch, I fervently learned the verses, traced on my board, in the afternoon, I allowed myself two good hours of dreaming, all the while pretending to chant the sacred words.

To this recreation I owed all my enthusiasm. My mind escaped from the narrow confines of the school and went to explore another universe, there it was subject to no constraints. In this universe, I was not always a little prince, to whom beings and things obeyed, it sometimes happened that I became a man, the man I wished to be later. I saw myself simple and robust, wearing clothes of raw wool, my eyes full of flame and my heart overflowing with tenderness.

At night, under my blanket, I continued the same dream. I built and rebuilt my life with its many adventures, its encounters, its brilliant actions, its inevitable obstacles, until the moment when immense black islands came to separate the patiently adjusted elements and return to chaos this barely nascent world. Everything became blurred. In the darkness of the night, the scattered fragments of my universe would emerge from time to time, as if carried away by the eddy. In the morning I would resume my occupations.

It was a Monday when my father, abandoning his habits, came to lunch at home. He explained to us that woolen djellabas were selling less well than in winter and that he intended to start making cotton haiks.

These fabrics still enjoy the same success.

Summer and winter, the women of Fez can only go out wrapped in these white pieces.

- Today, he added, I intend to take you both to the jewelry souk.

And addressing my mother, he continued:

- You have been asking me for these sun and moon bracelets (gold and silver) for a long time. It is time for me to offer them to you. Besides, my worker lost his mother who lived in the countryside. He left for the funeral; tomorrow he will be back and we will resume work.

My mother asked.

- Did she die of an illness?

- I believe, said my father, that she died mainly of old age, but it doesn't matter, may God receive her. in his mercy!

- But, I objected, I cannot miss the Msid to accompany you to the jewelry souk, I have my lesson to learn.

- Don't worry, my father replied. As I passed by, I saw the fqih, I warned him of your absence. You work well, this half-day of rest will be a just reward. But perhaps you don't like seeing pretty jewels and the excitement of the auction?

- Oh yes! Jewelry is beautiful, it's beautiful like...

I didn't dare continue my comparison. My father encouraged me:

- Beautiful like what?

I looked down and, in a confidential voice, I said timidly:

- Jewelry is as beautiful as flowers.

My father and mother burst out laughing. I found their reaction inappropriate. A doubt crept into my mind about the quality of their intelligence.

Lunch over, I went and sat on the stairs to wait for the jewel auction. Crouching on a step, my hands on my knees, I thought very deeply about the lunch conversation.

Was comparing jewels to flowers a sign of stupidity? My parents' laughter expressed the indulgence that adults show when children make foolish or childish remarks to them. I felt that my comparison expressed an essential idea. It should be greeted with silence. Laughter in such a circumstance became an incongruity.

I knew a few flowers: the marigolds and poppies that bloom in spring on graves, the plump daisies that offer their golden hearts to the sun, the bindweeds that straighten up under our feet when, on a beautiful day, my father took me to the hills of Bab Guissa.

On the terrace of our house, rose geraniums, carnations and Isfahan roses grew among fragments of pottery.

My knowledge of jewelry was less extensive. However, I had seen sumptuous ones on women and little girls during festivals. I classified them into two categories: everyday jewelry in blue-gray silver that fascinated me, and festive jewelry gleaming with precious stones. These, forged by the hands of genies in underground palaces, still retained in their shimmer and their sun-like color, the memory of the flames in which their material had flowed. For me, all these festive jewels came from hidden treasures, had belonged in immemorial times to dream princesses whose memory had been forgotten. One had to be foolish, one had to be childish to believe that these delicate architectures of gold and precious stones were the work of some hard-working craftsman, in a hurry to execute them in order to exchange them for vile currency. These magical ornaments were born gratuitously by the power of love.

They came to rest on the hair and delicate flesh of legendary princesses. Under the steps of these same princesses, other jewels were also born, free of charge but in a more fragile material. Then fields of poppies blossomed, buttercups and marigolds burst forth, violets and irises spread their perfume.

At six years old, I could not formulate such considerations on jewels and flowers, no discipline had yet taught me to classify my ideas methodically. My vocabulary was too poor to bring to light what was swarming confusedly within me. It was, I believe, this impossibility of sharing my discoveries with others, which had given rise to a painful melancholy in me. I forgave adults for scolding me, if need be for hitting me for a triviality, but I was mortally angry with them for not trying to understand me.

For my mother, I was a perfect boy if I washed my feet before entering the room; for my father, I was an object of pride if on Friday I copied his gestures to perform the ritual prayer; for the neighbors I was a model child if I did not draw graffiti on the walls of the staircase, if I did not make noise playing on the terrace.

I would have become a monster of stupidity if I had tried to initiate them into the mysteries of my particular universe. I had understood instinctively the tricks that had to be employed to live in peace with all these men and women who take themselves seriously and are bursting with their superiority.

Crouching on the step, hands on knees, I repeated to myself tirelessly: "Jewelry is beautiful." like flowers."

On the landing, my mother and Fatma Bziouya had been whispering for a quarter of an hour. From time to time, the My mother's voice burst out in an angry tone to chase away Zineb's cat that was prowling around her.

- Go away, she said to him, mangy, dirty as a sewer rat, go and walk your fleas somewhere else.

The whispers began again. A stifled laugh, a few sighs full of uncton, and each of the women headed for her apartments. My father passed by me:

- Keep playing, he said to me; after the Aâsser prayer, I will come back to get you and your mother.

- What are you doing on the stairs? my mother shouted to everyone.

In a hypocritical voice, I replied:

- I play.

- What are you playing at? the voice repeated.

-To the king.

- I wonder, said my mother, calling the whole house to witness, what a king can do on the stairs, crouching on a step!

The neighbors started laughing.

The plowmaker's wife thought it witty to add:

- Lalla Zoubida, your son will go far, he already thinks he's a king!

His sentence, tinged with a hint of insolence, went unanswered.

I fell back into my thoughts. And if it pleased me to be king! What can the wife of a plowmaker understand about princes and kings? Let her be content to peel her vegetables, to pound her spices, to lament the price of oil and coal which has increased by a penny! She had not the soul of a princess, she had never dreamed of the sound of jets of water in marble basins!

She had never made the slightest connection between the beauty of jewels and that of flowers. She always wore on her little finger a mean copper ring decorated with a glass cabochon. On feast days, she hung on her chest, on a buttonhole of her tunic, a silver hand with crude engravings.

Tonight, my mother will wear sun and moon bracelets on her wrists. Rahma will be green with jealousy. For several days, I will hear her say without joy:

- I am unlucky, I married an unfortunate plow maker; he is barely able to offer me a rope to draw water from the well. Ah! Allah has divided mankind very badly. To this one, suffering and misery, to others, prosperity, good food, gold and silver jewels. My God! When will my pain end?

My mother will answer him with emphatic courtesy:

- My sister, what is the use of complaining and blaming fate? God is just, he gives to each according to his heart.

- There is no God but God! all the neighbors will say.

Surely there is no god but God! I heard the muezzin proclaim it.

- Is this the Aâsser prayer, mom?

- Yes, your father will be back soon. Here, you will change your djellaba to go out, the one you

doors are full of stains.

The little doum broom creaked in Fatma Bziouya's room, it stopped abruptly. Our voice crossed the landing with stealthy steps, put his head into our room and asked in a low voice.

- Should I prepare too?

My mother had to nod. Fatma rushed into her room. The lid of a chest slammed shut.

On the ground floor, my father's voice uttered the usual phrase:

- Is there no one? Can I come in?

Lalla Kanza, from the depths of her temple blackened by the smoke of aromatic herbs, answered him:

- Come on, Maalem Abdeslem.

His footsteps echoed on the stairs. I left my step and went to change.

The jewelers' souk looked like the entrance to an anthill. People were jostling and bustling in all directions. No one seemed to be heading towards a specific goal. My mother and Fatma Bziouya followed my father and me, slowly, tightly wrapped in their white haiks. They were talking in low voices, trying to find the best. The very high-rise shops offered us the gleam of brand new silver jewelry that seemed to be cut from vulgar tin, tiaras and gold belts of such pretentious workmanship that they lost all nobility; these jewels did not resemble flowers.

No mystery bathed them. Human hands had made them without love to satisfy the vanity of the rich. They were right, all these shopkeepers, to sell them by weight, like spices. It made my heart ache. Many customers were bustling from one shop to another. Their eyes shone with greed and covetousness. Other characters, men and women, grouped here and there, were holding back their tears.

Later, I understood the full meaning of their melancholy. I felt myself this humiliation of coming to offer to the indifferent rapacity of men what one held to be one's most precious possession. Jewels to which memories were attached, festive ornaments that took part in all our joys become in a market like this poor things that one weighs, sniffs, turns and turns between one's fingers to finally offer half their real price.

As soon as we arrived, brokers or dellals came to offer us various items. My father barely looked at them. He refused them with a shake of the head. Behind us, leaning against the wall, the women whispered. Time seemed very long before my father finally took, from the hands of a big devil with ecstatic eyes who was breathlessly reciting some number, a pair of bracelets all in pyramidal cabochons, one gold and the other silver. He passed them to my mother who examined them carefully, tried them on four or five times, asked Fatma Bziouya to put them on her wrist to admire the effect. She discussed each detail for a quarter of an hour. Then my mother gave them back to my father without explanation. The broker continued to mechanically repeat the number that must represent the price of this merchandise. My father handed him the jewelry, made an affirmative sign. The number changed and the big devil of a dellal dove into the crowd. His hand alone traveled for a moment with the bracelets above the heads and finally disappeared-

to recreate.

We waited a long time. Fatigue paralyzed my legs, my head was spinning, I yawned until I fell apart. dear jaws.

My father was beginning to show signs of impatience. The broker burst in. The figure had increased. At a further affirmative sign from my father, the figure changed. The broker disappeared into the hubbub and commotion of the crowd.

The souk was in full swing. The brokers were shouting at the top of their lungs, shouting figures that were hard to grasp, running from one direction to another, grabbing a customer's hand and dragging him furiously behind them. Here and there, arguments arose. Hardly had one dispute died down than another broke out further away.

Sometimes a wave of delirious men and hysterical women would overwhelm us, flatten us against the wall and wash away onto an unknown shore.

I was exhausted. My father, who had noticed this, lifted me in his arms and held me tight against his chest. His forehead was streaming with sweat. My angry mother began to curse the dellal, to invoke all the saints she knew so that they would inflict on him the harsh punishment he deserved.

It was a shame to behave like this with honest people! What was he planning during this long absence? Did he take us for ignorant country folk? We will know how to unmask the truth. We will pay the fair price and we will not let ourselves be "rolled" by this miscreant. But the miscreant was always invisible.

Suddenly, my father put me down on the ground and disappeared into the crowd. His absence lasted. Shouts rose up at the other end of the souk. They dominated the tumult, bursting like a storm. Great ripples ran through this human sea. Explosions of anger flew here and there, resumed a few steps further on, transformed into a din.

All the people in the souk began to run; Fatma Bziouya and my mother repeated "Allah! Allah!", complained loudly about the pain in their feet that the crowd was crushing, and tried to hold on to their haiks that were being carried away by the current.

Finally, my father and the broker passed by, holding each other by the collar. The souk formed a procession for them. The two men had red eyes and foam at the corners of their lips. My father had lost his turban and the dellal had a bloodstain on its cheek.

They left, followed by the onlookers.

My mother, the neighbor, and I began to cry loudly. We rushed at random, in pursuit of them. We came out at the dried fruit souk. No trace of the two antagonists or their procession. I expected to see deserted streets, abandoned stalls, turbans and babouches lost in the general panic. I was disappointed. No trace of the fight had marked these places.

There was buying and selling, there was joking, and some bad boys pushed their indifference to the point of singing fashionable refrains.

Our sadness was becoming stifling in this atmosphere. We felt all our isolation. My mother decided to go home.

- There is no point, she added, in running in all directions. Let us go back to wait and to cry.

At home, once in our room, my mother took off her haik, sat down on a mattress and, her head in her two hands, wept silently. For the first time, her pain upset me.

It was not like the great outbursts and lamentations she sometimes indulged in to relieve her heart. Her tears ran down her chin, flattened themselves on her chest, but she remained there, without moving, moving in her solitude.

I cried, too, for a moment, disturbing the silence with loud sniffles, then I lay down on the bed and, staring at the ceiling, waited. I did not know exactly what I was waiting for. The drama of the jewelry souk necessarily had a denouement. When my mother spoke of waiting, she undoubtedly meant it. Between us, we set about carrying out our program: my mother wept and I waited. I had long been accustomed to this exercise.

Evening fell. Lights shone in all the windows of the house. Our room remained dark. In the darkness, monstrous figures formed before my eyes, frayed, transformed, gave way to immense green sparks, and returned to brush my eyelids with their brownish veils.

Finally, my father's voice pierced the darkness. I sat up. My mother, lost in her grief, continued to let out imperceptible sighs. The steps echoed more and more distinctly under my father's footsteps. The bedroom door opened, his silhouette stood out in thick black against the gray of the wall.

- Why, he said, did you not light the lamp? Where are the matches?

My mother, in a little girl's voice, answered:

- They are on the shelf, against the tin tea box.

My father asked:

- Is Mohammed already asleep?

- No, dad, I'm not sleeping.

He struck a match and lifted the glass of the lamp.

- What were you doing in the dark? he asked again.

- I was waiting for your return.

With the lamp lit, my mother raised her head. Her face was still streaming with tears.

My father noticed.

- Why so many tears? We have, thank God, no cause for sadness. I had to leave you alone to correct this miscreant who was trying to play some trick on us in his own way. Everything is now back to normal and here are the bracelets.

He placed the two bracelets on the mattress next to my mother.

- I don't want to see these ominous jewels, my mother said. I don't think I'll ever wear them. I feel that with them, misfortune has entered this house, you would do well to go and sell them tomorrow.

- These are the bracelets you wanted, take them and do not say anything irrelevant.

My mother got up, took the jewels without looking at them, opened her chest and threw them in angrily.

- You will see: what I tell you is the truth. I may not be intelligent, I am only a weak woman, but my heart does not lie when it tells me about someone or something. These bracelets do not bring me any joy. Now, I will take care of dinner.

We barely touched this rather improvised dinner. We went to bed. I will always remember this night haunted by nightmares. I can still see the scenes of violence and blood, I can still see the monsters, I can still see the eyes burning with hatred that hunted us, my mother, my father and me. Masses of men with hideous faces pursued us through the city to strip us of our riches. They were particularly after my Box of Wonders. My father appeared on a black horse.

He had my box under his arm. He galloped through the crowd. Hands tried to hold him back. He spurred with both hands. His horse's long mane spread out like a banner. My mother and I suddenly found ourselves in a deserted countryside. My mother wept silently. The summer light flooded spaces of sand and stones. My father's silhouette stood out on a hill. He

was waiting for us. He no longer had a horse. He was still clutching my Box of Wonders under his arm.

- I saved her, he told us, and, addressing me, he added: She is yours, so open her.

I laid it on the bare earth and opened it carefully. My eyes were dazzled: on a background of freshly cut flowers (carnations and roses) lay, as if in a casket, gold jewels enhanced with gems. I had never seen such beautiful ones, I raised my head to say to my parents: "Look at my treasure."

They looked into the Box. My mother said:

- Beautiful jewelry always brings bad luck to those who own it.

A great cold enveloped me; I closed the box, began to sob.

- Sidi Mohammed, why are you crying? Wake up! Wake up!

It was already daylight. Buckets rattled on the patio. My father leaned over me, feeling my forehead, I opened my eyes.

- No! my father said, he doesn't have a fever. He must have just had a nightmare.

Sitting in bed, my mother kept repeating:

- I tell you he is sick. With all the excitement last night and the hustle and bustle of the jewelry souk where you thought it necessary to drag him, it doesn't surprise me that he fell ill.

- This child is fine, my father proclaimed. A little tiredness, no doubt. He should not go to school.

- My God! Punish me, I am the main culprit, but do not strike me in my child. Man, I tell you that I do not want to keep these bracelets in any way. With these jewels, misfortune enters this House.

My father walked towards the door. As he put on his slippers, he said:

- I'm leaving, I feel that if I stay I will run out of patience.

- Go, replied my mother, you are a man, it is natural that you have a heart of stone.

My mother should not have said such things. It is not at all natural for a man to have a heart of stone. One day, I will be a man, I will not have a heart of stone. Only, in the face of events, my father reacts as a man should react. He keeps his lucidity, his composure. My mother would like to see him react like her: to get agitated, to shout, to exaggerate the importance of the slightest incident.

My father was right, by the way: I did not feel ill at all. However, I had to obey my mother and stay in bed all day. After lunch, we received a visit from Lalla Aïcha. It had been a long time since we had heard from her or from her husband Sidi Larbi the babouchier. My mother hurried to prepare tea. She then began to tell her old friend the story of her misfortunes. She recounted in detail our escapade to the jewelry souk, the terrible drama that unfolded concerning the bracelets, stopped to cry for a moment, then continued her story, interspersed with sighs and invocations. She prophesied lyrically, announcing catastrophes that would not fail to strike our home if my father did not decide to sell the bracelets of ill omen, the hidden cause of our ruin.

Lalla Aïcha, out of politeness, approved, sighed, nodded her head, and lightly tapped herself on the cheek.

My mother finally looked at her friend.

- But you? You don't tell me anything about your house. How are you? How is your husband?

Lalla Aicha, for all response, buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. A torrent of tears flowed through her fingers. Her body was shaken by violent spasms. The pain strangled her at times. My mother put both her arms around her shoulders and began to sob with her. Lalla Aicha stopped. Her cheeks still shiny with tears, her nose wet, she said to my mother:

- Zoubida, I have no one left in the world, you are my friend, you are my only family. The son of sin for whom I stripped myself, abandoned me to take a second wife, the daughter of Abderrah-man the hairdresser.

- Allah! Allah! cried my mother, oh my sister, my poor sister, my God, what pain!

The two women, once again in each other's arms, began to sob.

The heat, the bed, these horrible scenes of which I felt, without understanding it, all the tragedy, made me really sick. I had violent headaches, the fever shook me all over. I began to vomit on my blanket. My mother rushed in, panicked, shouting:

- My son is going to die, oh my friends, oh my sisters, my son! Save my son!

The neighbors invaded the room, my eyelids closed. In my skull, I could no longer hear than the beating of a gigantic drum.

Chapter IX

He hasn't eaten anything since his lunch yesterday. This sentence, pronounced in a sigh, is enough to wake me up. A dense darkness filled our room. My mother was whispering. She was addressing an indecisive silhouette, standing in the middle of the room. The shape did not move. A vague murmur escaped from it from time to time. Syllables devoid of meaning reached me in my bed. The two shapes abandoned me. I tried to move, the drum beating in my skull redoubled in ardor. It mingled with the shadow of the impalpable streaks of red ash. A cloud of tiny sparks swirled around my face. Silent and cold, they transformed the setting that was familiar to me into an unreal atmosphere. A dull pain spread through my bones and drew a moan from me.

My mother came back, approached my bed with stealthy steps, leaned slightly over me and remained in this attitude for a long moment, so silent that she did not seem to breathe. She formed before my eyes a black mass with fluffy contours. I expected to see her fray and dissolve like those ghosts who visited me during my sleepless nights.

She finally sighed and took a step back.

- I'm awake, I told him, but I'm in pain.
- It's better since you're talking to me.
- Why is it so dark? I asked.
- It's evening, replied my mother; I didn't want to light the lamp so as not to disturb your sleep. You had a fever all last night and all morning. My eyes have not stopped streaming. Alas my tears cannot ease your suffering.

- I'm hungry.

- This is good news, praise be to God! I'll get you a bowl of broth.

She left me for a moment. The bowl of broth she brought me remained on my lap for a few minutes. Just the smell of the food made my stomach turn. My mother urged me in vain to taste it. She had supported my body with cushions. The room rolled, lurched, was carried through space, spinning on itself, subject to the immutable law of stars and meteors. My mother had just enough time to catch the bowl that was beginning to spill over the blankets and laid me down with infinite precautions. The drumbeats under my skull were growing more exasperated.

The objects gradually stopped drifting away. My mother came and sat down not far from my bed on a very low mattress.

The plowmaker's wife called out to him:

- Zoubida, how is Sidi Mohammed?

Cover him well and give him some hot tea to drink, he must have caught a cold.

Fatma intervened from her window.

- I think he's suffering from sunstroke. You should wrap lemon peels and mint leaves.

- You may both be right, my sisters, but if God does not deign to relieve his sufferings, all my care will remain superfluous. I will try all remedies to hasten my child's recovery.

My father announced himself at the front door of the house. He arrived earlier than usual. As he climbed the stairs, my mother hurried to light the oil lamp. Our room was flooded with yellow light. My father entered. He came to lean over me. His eye sockets dug two black holes in his face, which seemed pale and tired to me. He gently touched my forehead, nodded and turned his back on me without saying anything.

My mother set the little coffee table for dinner. It was, I think, the saddest dinner of their lives.

From my bed, I could see the brown earthenware dish. I couldn't make out what food was on it. I knew there was a saffron sauce, vegetables, and meat. The smell of saffron made me feel nauseous. My father and mother, each lost in their own thoughts, didn't eat, didn't speak.

Zineb's cat emerged from the invisible, crept up to the table, looked at the motionless forms of the two guests and meowed in astonishment. He meowed timidly, in a plaintive voice, clutching his tail between his hind legs and drawing his neck into his shoulders. His meow was muffled in the atmosphere as if in a cotton ball. Fear seized him. He widened his yellow eyes, folded his ears back, spat out a horrible curse and went away with all his fur hanging out.

My parents had not moved a finger, had not opened their mouths. An end-of-the-world anguish weighed on everything. I burst into tears. My father shook himself from his torpor and asked me:

-Where does it hurt, my child? I gasped and answered him:

- I don't have any pain, but why don't you talk?

- We have nothing to say. Rest and don't cry anymore.

My mother woke up in turn, took the table and went to her kitchen. She came back, her hands full tray and glasses for tea. She found my father standing, already getting ready for bed.

- You don't have any tea? my mother asked him.

- No, and from now on, you will be careful not to waste too much of your sugar.

- Am I a wasteful woman?

- That is not my thought. I simply want to tell you that from tomorrow onwards, it will be difficult for us to have sugar and tea every day.

My mother turned pale. I opened my eyes wide so as not to miss anything of the scene. She put down the plate, straightened up, looked my father straight in the face.

- I sense a great misfortune, she said in a broken voice.

My father remained silent, his eyelids lowered. Suddenly, a loud snap made me jump in my bed, drawing a groan of pain from me. My mother had applied both hands to her cheeks with the force of despair. She sat down on the floor, struggled with her face, scratched herself, pulled her hair without uttering a word. My father rushed to hold her hands back. They struggled for a good while. My mother collapsed face down on the ground.

- O woman! Do you no longer fear the wrath of God? said my father softly. Have confidence in his mercy. God will not abandon us. What happens to us, happens every day to thousands of Muslims. The believer is often tested. I lost in the hustle and bustle of the haik auctions all our meager capital.

I had put the money in a handkerchief. I must have let the handkerchief fall to the ground, thinking I was slipping it

in my bag.

My mother raised her head. She said nothing.

My father, in his calm voice, continued:

- Why complain? We must praise God in all circumstances.

Finally, my mother broke her silence.

- What are we going to do?

- I'm going to work.

- How much did you lose?

- All my working capital. I don't even have enough to pay my worker who hasn't received anything this week. I also owe a month's rent to the owner of the workshop. I thought I would settle all these debts and buy cotton.

- Couldn't the merchants give you credit? You are known honorably.

- I will never stoop so low as to beg cotton from one of these thieves. Nor do I want the miserable wages of a laborer. I am a mountaineer and a peasant. The harvest season has barely begun, and harvesters are being hired. I will go and work in the vicinity of Fez.

- You would dare to abandon me with a sick child?

- Would you rather starve to death? Would you like to become an object of pity for your friends and neighbors? I will be two days' walk from the city. Sidi Mohammed will be better tomorrow. Make him some wild mint soup; cover him well so that he sweats profusely. Today he has less fever than last night.

- This is a punishment from God that overwhelms us. It is these cursed bracelets that have sown misfortune in our house. Why don't you sell them?

- I plan to sell them. I will leave you this money to feed yourselves during my absence. Driss the naughty one remains faithful to us, he will come every day to do the shopping. Give him something to eat, he has no one.

My father thought for a moment.

- I will leave you alone for a month. I will try not to spend any of my salary, it will be possible for me to restart the workshop as soon as I return.

A great silence fell, a heavy, damp, oily silence, black as soot. I was suffocating. I wished with all my strength that a door would slam, that a neighbor would utter a cry of joy or a moan of pain, that some extraordinary event would occur to break this anguish. I wanted to speak, to say any stupid thing, but my throat tightened and a complaint expired on my lips.

My parents did not move, gradually transforming into nightmare characters. The more I opened my eyes to see them, the more they became fluid, elusive, sometimes transparent, sometimes aggressively black, but without precise contours. For the first time, I had the sensation of absolute emptiness, of solitude without mercy. My heart filled with pain. A hard ball formed in my chest, hindering my breathing. I closed my eyes. I prayed fervently. I felt abandoned at the gates of Hell.

No! I have not yet forgotten those moments. Lord! I remember. I remember that solitude

vast as the immense expanses of dead planets, of this solitude where sound dies without echo, where shadows are prolonged in depths of anguish and death. And the heart that bleeds! Inexhaustible source of pain, torrent overheated by the fires of my sorrows and my pains; cry of my flesh crushed under the weight of your curse. I was only a child, Lord! I did not know that the day was born from the night, that after the sleep of winter, the earth under the caress of the sun smiled with all its flowers, buzzed with all its insects, sang with the voice of its nightingales.

My father left us the day after at dawn. He left with only a shepherd's bag made of dwarf palm, which he had bought the day before, a new sickle and a canvas bag with a drawstring closure. My mother had made it from a piece of cotton haik and stuffed it with provisions: black olives, dried figs, toasted and sweetened flour, two loaves of aniseed and ten qarcha-las. This is what we call small round sweet loaves, flavored with aniseed and orange blossom and decorated with sesame seeds.

I was awake when my father left. My mother gave him some advice and remained after he left, prostrate on her bed, her face hidden in her two hands. I had the feeling that we had been abandoned, that we had become orphans.

Everyone in the neighborhood must have known about our material troubles and my father's departure. They would show us an ostentatious pity more humiliating than the worst contempt. With my father gone, we were left without support, without defense.

The father, in a family like ours, represents an occult protection. There is no need for him to be rich, his moral prestige gives strength, balance, assurance and respectability.

My father came home only in the evening, but it seemed that the whole day was spent in preparations to receive him. I understood what was tormenting my mother that morning, in the light of the barely dawning day. She realized in the depths of her heart that her preparations would be in vain.

No one would push open our door in the evening, bring the sweet smell of work from outside, or serve as a link between us and the exuberant life on the street.

To my mother and me, my father represented strength, adventure, security, peace. He had never left his home; the circumstances which compelled him to do so assumed a hideous figure in our imaginations.

The house was slowly waking up, greeting the sun and its familiar sounds. I felt better this morning. I sat up in bed. My head felt no weight on my shoulders, my arms were not agitated by any fever.

Mom, I said, is a month long?

My mother shook herself out of her stupor, looked to the right, then to the left, as if to recognize the place where she stood there and stared at me with astonished eyes.

- Have you spoken, Sidi Mohammed?

- Yes, Mom; I'm asking you if a month is long.

- A month lasts a month, my son, but for us, the next month will be an eternity.

- I know how to wait; you don't know yet, or rather, you knew it once but you must have forgotten. My mother seemed stunned by this reflection.

- What are you waiting for?

- I'm waiting to be a man. You don't expect anything anymore since you're a grown-up.

I was silent for a moment before adding:

- When you were a little girl, you couldn't do everything you wanted, you waited until you were a woman to realize your projects, buy the clothes you wanted, go out with Lalla Aicha your friend, prepare the dishes you liked to eat. I eat what you give me, I never go out alone, I often wear shirts that are not my size.

My mother's astonishment grew. She did not know what to answer me; she looked at me with curiosity.

Quietly I whispered:

- When I am a man, I will wear beautiful white djellabas that will be washed every day, I will eat every morning at least a pound of very hot doughnuts with lots of butter, sometimes with honey. I will have forty cats that will always obey me. They will never make any mess in the corners.

Besides, we will live in another house with a bitter orange tree in the yard.

A smile lit up my mother's face.

- Your wife will never agree to watch over your flock of cats.

- I'm not getting married, you like cats, you can take care of them.

She burst out laughing frankly. Her sudden gaiety gave me back all my confidence. I laughed louder than she did; I clapped my hands. My mother put her index finger to her lips and said to me:

- What would the neighbors say if they heard you laughing like that the day your father left?

- My father will come back soon and we will be very rich again.

- But we were never rich.

- Yes, we were not hungry; and isn't our room the prettiest in the house?

- Rest, my little one; as long as I am alive, you will never be hungry, even if I have to beg.

Someone knocked timidly at the door. My mother stood up.

- Who's there? she said as she headed towards the entrance corridor. A long discussion followed, while whispers and whispers. I finally heard my mother say in an urgent voice:

- Come in, Fatma! Come in and give it to him yourself; he will refuse me, he is so stubborn! Come in then!

Fatma Bziouya appeared. She was holding a steaming bowl in her hand. She approached me, gave me a wide smile and asked me:

- How do you feel this morning, fqih!

I didn't answer. I didn't want to engage in any conversation with this woman who had come to coax me into swallowing some foul beverage.

- I prepared some tadeffi for you! Would you like to try it?

I usually liked tadeffi, a soup flavored with wild mint. On principle, I turned my

face towards the wall. I thought I would thus put an end to any attempt at persuasion. My mother came to the help from our neighbor.

- I'm sure you'll like this soup. Afterwards, I'll send Zineb to buy you a donut.

I had to be asked for a moment more. I finally sat up. I took the bowl, sniffed it with a suspicious nostril, looked at the two women leaning over me with concern and declared that I did not like spicy soup.

They both answered me in unison, with moving unity, that there was not the slightest particle of chili or pepper in this soup. I looked my mother in the eye and asked her point-blank how she could know that since she had not tasted this soup. She tried to answer me, searched for her sentence, got confused, sighed, raised her eyes to the ceiling to call the smoky beams as witness and went to take refuge in the kitchen.

Fatma insisted,

-I assure you that there are no spices in this tadeffi. With a gesture, I stuck the bowl in his hands.
-Everyone knows that tadeffi without spices is absolutely inedible. It's not because I'm sick reading that you're going to make me eat flour glue.

Fatma lost patience.

- I tell you it's good! Taste it first before you talk such nonsense. Take it quickly.

I was still sulking. Fatma became tender. In a caressing voice she called me: sour candy, little white cheese, milk vermicelli. I couldn't resist such cuddly words, I took back the bowl of tadeffi. I was quite hungry, so I drank this delicious soup in large gulps.

Then I asked my mother to wash me. I changed my shirt and put on my djellaba. I felt healed but not yet strong enough to return to school.

For a few days I was going to enjoy a real vacation.

Rahma saw me at the window and greeted me happily:

- Praise be to God! Sidi Mohammed! You are now well again. We were very worried about you. Promise- I will never fall ill, I lose my appetite, I swear by God and his venerated saints.

- May Allah keep you and yours in excellent health, Rahma, may he give you happiness and pros-
"Perish," my mother replied from the back of her kitchen.

Rahma leaned on the grille of her window, determined to continue the dialogue.

- Amine, O my sister Zoubida. Did Sidi Abdeslem leave this morning? I heard him coming down the stairs.

- Yes, he must be far away already.

- God will bring him back to you safe and sound.

Rahma addressed the whole house and declared:

- Times are getting hard for us poor people, but let us know how to praise God in joy as in adversity.

In response, someone sneezed loudly downstairs. He sneezed three times, then blew his nose with conviction. The sound of his nostrils reminded me of the sound of the Ramadan trumpet. I burst into joyful laughter.

My mother took me by the shoulders and led me back to my mattress. She advised me in a firm voice to lie down. I was not yet strong enough to indulge in eccentricities. I had to stay in bed. She recommended that I recite a few verses from the Koran so as not to forget everything I had learned and to

to draw blessing upon our house and upon the head of my father, who has gone into the unknown.

I settled down on the mattress, looking sullen. I didn't feel like reciting verses from the Koran, I didn't feel like doing anything anymore. I listened with half an ear to the ordinary chatter of the women of the house. I paid no attention to what they were saying. Despite the sun, everything seemed dark to me. The dirt on the walls that I could see through our window disgusted me. Finally, my mother served lunch. The menu consisted of two doughnuts that were meant for me, rancid butter, black olives and a bunch of radishes, a gift from Fatma Bziouya or rather from her husband, Mohammed the gardener.

I started on a doughnut. It became pasty and tasteless in my mouth. I chewed it, re-chewed it, moving it from one cheek to the other; I ended up swallowing it without pleasure. Once the table was cleared, my mother placed on the wood a small enamel teapot that we never used and two glasses. Without a tray, without a kettle in the room, without the usual ritual that presided over the preparation of tea, an impression of destitution floated in the atmosphere. Only miserable households proceeded in this way.

To my reflections, my mother replied that she could no longer spend her time polishing the tray, washing the glasses, polishing the pewter teapot. What was she going to do with her time? I did not know.

After lunch, my mother told me to be good, took her haik and went to visit Lalla. Aicha her friend. They had so much to say to each other.

I still remember the awful hours spent waiting. Not daring to go to the window, repressing the urge I had to run up the stairs, to jump into the sun on the terrace. I glanced into my Box of Wonders. It was no longer a box of wonders but a coffin where lay the pitiful corpses of my dreams. I made a terrible grimace. The neighbors must not hear me cry.

I blew my nose into an old rag that was lying on the floor. Lying on my back, I stared at the scaly spots that dotted the walls of our room. They no longer moved. They used to organize ballets in my honor that delighted the eyes. I spent hours following the evolutions of these changing shapes. Now, they were nothing more than frozen spots that made me feel nauseous.

My heart began to beat with sadness, anguish, spite and anger. Above all, it beat with fear. Despite the discussions of the neighbors, the familiar noise of the little doun brooms, the crackling of the sparks, the whirring of the bellows, I was afraid. Exhausted by my silent tears, I finally fell asleep.

When my mother came back, I had a fever again. She covered me warmly, sat down beside my bed and cried for a long time. She hummed softly, stopped from time to time to blow her nose, then resumed her murmur.

In the evening she didn't prepare dinner, she went to bed early. I had trouble falling asleep. I was restless in my bed, tossing and turning without being able to fall asleep.

Suddenly the storm broke loose. The wind rushed at the house with howls of fury. The doors slammed. Amidst the moans, the cries and the hissing of the gust, arose a timid song of a flute. It was not a human flute, like those seven-holed reeds that make ghosts dance in the light of the stars, it was, without a doubt, some instrument of a shiny and cold material, forged without noise at the bottom of the waters by a djinn struck down by madness. It spoke a language at once heartbreaking and sweet, sometimes incomprehensible, grimacing, evil, sometimes of a fierce nostalgia. There were calls, supplications, reproaches, hyena laughter, long cries of pain, words of love and phrases of anger.

The wind laughed, played with the doors, banged them with fury. To ward off these dark forces, I recited the Surah of Unity three times. Trembling in all my limbs, I buried my face in a cushion; I finally fell asleep.

My life flowed in two opposing worlds. During the day I suffered all sorts of constraints, I took part in dramas that I did not understand, the night served me as bait for its monsters, launched me into the

empty of its abysses, gave me fruits that my hands could not grasp. Double life, strewn with pitfalls, mirages, farces, but to which I ended up getting used. I did not act, I suffered. Each fragment of becoming brooded a particle of mystery. The moments followed one another, each with its load of joy, alas! too ephemeral, with its weight of pain that imprinted its bruise on my flesh. According to the mood of some and the whim of others, my days seemed dark or radiant, my nights, a haven of rest, a place of torture, a moment of bliss, the painful ordeal of souls damned for all eternity.

This later gave me a taste for adventure, namely: a taste for death. I died every evening to be reborn instantly in a dimensionless universe. I was resurrected every morning to find the sun, the song of the sparrows, bread, wheat and the freshness of spring water. Bread and water tasted good and I was happy to be on a land where they were not lacking. However, in the hours of sorrow and solitude, they seemed bitter, bland, hard for my too narrow throat.

Of course, I preferred day to night, the days in principle held, obeyed the logic of time, followed one another in appearance in good order. The nights gave birth to characters, sites, events, which created their space and their time. My parents, the neighbors, the children of the Msid the master and his quince wand inhabited the sunny land but it , happened to me at night to meet them in distant countries deprived of light, in paths bristling with dangers. Our relations, often were no longer the same as during the day. Many times, I tried to avoid them, my efforts always proved vain. I could not escape them, neither in this world, nor in any other. It was given to them to pamper me or torment me according to their good pleasure. Later I will defend myself. Now I was just a child, a child lying in a curled-up position, snoring quietly while all the men had already left for work, while all the neighbors had already washed.

My mother woke me up.

- Sidi Mohammed, you are lying down badly, you are going to get a stiff neck.

I opened my eyelids with difficulty. Daylight flooded our room.

- Get up and go do your ablutions, in the meantime, I'm going to cook you an egg.

- I really like eggs in oil with red pepper and parsley.

- I know, I'll add some red pepper and parsley and even a pinch of cumin.

This sentence did not escape Rahma's ear.

She stood at her window and shouted:

- We call this dish a Jewish omelette, it's delicious.

My mother replied:

- Sidi Mohammed is still sick, he has cravings like a pregnant woman.

All the neighbors joined in the conversation.

Some laughed, others wished me a speedy recovery. Aunt Kanza, the choua-fa, told one of her memories: she had known a young pregnant woman who, one day, going to the baths, had seen some beautiful white cheeses in a milkman's shop. She wanted to taste some, but the milkman, a greedy man, a disciple of Satan, refused to offer her the slightest crumb. The child arrived in the world a few months later. On her belly, a piece of white cheese stood out clearly.

Aunt Kanza had seen it, seen it with her own eyes.

- Fortunately, said a voice, without the slightest irony, that the piece of cheese was not hanging from his forehead or one of his cheeks.

Driss, the snarling one, called from the front door. My mother asked him to wait a second, she was going downstairs. She cut a large piece of bread, ran to her kitchen to coat it with rancid butter, wrapped a handful of black olives in greasy paper and rushed up the stairs. Before going back up, she borrowed Aunt Kanza's bucket, filled it with water from the well and struggled up the steps. At the door of our kitchen, the porous earthenware jar of drinking water had always stood. My mother poured the bucket into it. She came back to me and said:

- I'm going to get ready, we're going to go out together; we'll pick up Lalla Aïcha who's waiting for us. Today I'm taking you to see someone you don't know. Aren't you happy to go out for a bit? We are going very far...

As she spoke, she wrapped herself in her haik, tightened her veil, shook the dust from her slippers.

- You don't know the Qalqlyine neighborhood, you'll see, it's a pretty neighborhood with narrow derbs that slope down, houses with painted ceilings and one or two fig trees that come out of the walls and lean over the alley. You'll like all that. Blow your nose, what did you do with your handkerchief? Blow your nose!

I was going around in circles looking for my handkerchief, I finally discovered it under a cushion all crumpled and stuck together. I pulled on it to have enough surface to place my nose on. I blew my nose hard, so hard that my fingers were all wet. I threw the handkerchief away and wiped my fingers on my djellaba.

We were about to leave the room when Fatma Bziouya called out to my mother.

- Lalla Zoubida! Where are you going?

- Lalla Aïcha invited us to spend the day with her, she is so alone!

- What has become of her husband, Sidi Larbi? Hasn't he repudiated the hairdresser's daughter yet?

- No, but I know that he is currently paying for his ingratitude towards Lalla Aïcha. His in-laws are paying him back the bitter days, accuses him of letting his young wife suffer from hunger.

My mother removed her veil that was hindering her from speaking. The house was all ears. What a blessing to know more than the others! What a magnificent opportunity to show all these envious women how highly Lalla Aïcha held her. She confided all her secrets to her! At the end, she let it be understood that she knew much more, but that propriety forbade her from revealing everything. We finally left. I walked ahead, devouring the displays with my eyes. When we arrived at Sidi Ahmed Tijani, my mother headed towards the offering box. In a wall covered with mosaics, there was a hole, at the height of a man, topped with an ornate bronze grille.

My mother did not place any offering in the hole.

She simply put her hand in, rubbed her cheek against the woodwork surrounding it and murmured a vague prayer, I was too small to reach the hole, I pressed my lips to the cold mosaic of the wall. This show of respect for Sidi Ahmed Tijani pleased my mother.

- Come, my little eye, and may Allah preserve you from all harm! She said to me.

I followed her. We took a few steps. A pepper and tomato seller had set up shop in the corner of an alley. He displayed his vegetables on the ground in small, neat piles, in the shape of a pyramid.

- How much do you sell your tomatoes for? my mother asked him. She bent over, felt here, touched there, mixed peppers and tomatoes, sowed disorder. The merchant, furious, replied that this merchandise

was not for sale, especially to such an annoying customer.

Very dignified, my mother stood up and advised him to pick up his garbage if he did not intend to sell it. Lazy people like that should not be allowed to clutter the street and hinder traffic. She was sure to continue her diatribe, but I grabbed her hand and forced her to follow me. We left the merchant shaken with anger.

To our left stood a mental portal decorated with nails and bronze hammers of very fine work,

- Me! Tell me who owns this house?
- This is not a house, it is a Christian office.
- I see Muslims entering there.
- They work with the Christians. The Christians, my son, are rich and pay well those who know their language.
- Will I speak the language of Christians when I grow up?
- God preserve you, my son, from any contact with these people we do not know.

Zenqat-Hajjama Street opened on the left, facing the old slave market. As soon as we entered the house, my mother called Lalla Aïcha. She welcomed us from her room on the second floor and asked us to come up. She was waiting for us, sitting in front of her kettle that was throwing jets of steam. The room was the picture of desolation. It oozed misery and boredom. I had known it in better days. No more cretonne on the mattresses, no more brightly colored rugs! The painted wooden shelves with their cargo of earthenware bowls and decorated plates had disappeared, the clock left in its place a light stain on the wall. The number of mattresses had not changed but they were stuffed with vegetable horsehair instead of wool. The horsehair had settled, the mattresses were cold and hard. Besides, the whole room seemed cold and hard. A kind of anguish permeated the atmosphere. The house seemed dead to me. The silent tenants were crouching, no doubt, in the darkest corners of their rooms. A little cat was meowing desperately on the terrace. He must have been meowing for days. His voice bled with each call.

Lalla Aïcha prepared the tea. She served it in a small yellow copper tray with faded engravings. She performed her duties as a hostess with great dignity.

No one said anything. Each of us three pursued our own particular dream, absorbed in our own thoughts. Lalla Aïcha broke the silence.

- We will go instead to the Seffah district, the fqih of Qalklyine is traveling in the djebel. It seems that he still has family in a remote village. Sidi El Arafî whom we will go to consult is blind. I have the information from Khadouj Lalaouia who consulted him two or three times. She assured me that everything he had predicted for her had come true point by point.

I have hope, Zoubida; with the help of this seer, I am sure to reach the goal. We are very weak creatures, happiness is a fragile thing. My nest has been ransacked, I will not rest until the day it becomes what it was again.

My mother nodded, I sighed because I knew that in such circumstances it would be appropriate - was born to sigh. Silence fell again.

My mother finally said:

-Lalla Aïcha, I too am in great need of advice. I am trembling for my house, for my husband,

for my son. When the wrath of God is unleashed on poor people like us, it reduces them to ashes. People who "know" are of great help to us. Sidi El Arafî has a good reputation, he will surely help us.

- The slave is allowed to do what is in his power to remedy his misery, then he must do it to surrender to his lord for the accomplishment of his purposes. Let us have confidence.

Lalla Aïcha, who had lost none of her plumpness, struggled to get up from the ground and took her haik.

Chapter X

We had no trouble finding Si El Arafî's house. The people of the Seffah neighborhood, proud to be the neighbors of such an illustrious man, hastened to give us information. A child of my age had offered to accompany us. He guided us through a maze of streets that became increasingly narrow, increasingly dark, increasingly cluttered with piles of garbage and emaciated cats. We finally arrived at a small square flooded with sunlight. On this bright space opened the entrances of two water mills, three doors of dilapidated houses and a manhole. Clouds of dust and flies swirled in the air. Various smells were waging a battle there: household waste, donkey piss, lean cooking, benzoin and incense mingled their scents!

The child who accompanied us pointed his right index finger toward the central door, stuck his left index finger in his nostril and left without saying anything. The door opened. An old woman with an uncovered face carrying a basket of reeds on her head came out. She looked at us calmly, nodded. She headed toward the black passageway by which we had arrived. We entered the entrance corridor in single file. We beat the ground with the tips of our slippers before setting foot. It was dark in the corridor. The pavement was uneven. From time to time, my mother or Lalla Aïcha called the Prophet for help. They took turns stumbling over the same obstacle, a poorly adjusted paving stone, a brick that had been lying there by mistake.

The corridor turned left. The light from the patio dazzled us. We sighed with contentment: a vine was climbing along the wall facing us. The leaves, a dense green, burst out against the whiteness of the lime that covered all the walls of the house. This courtyard breathed a monastic peace.

Pigeons cooed and turtledoves answered in their language. In vain I looked for these birds that were welcoming us joyfully. They must be spying on us from their hiding places full of shade and coolness.

There was no one in the patio. For a few minutes we stood there, not knowing who we were talking to. address. My mother dared to call:

- O people of the house!

A woman's voice asked:

- Who do you want to see?

My mother continued:

- O people of the house, is it with you that Sidi El Arafî lives? We wish to consult him.

The head of a little Negroid girl emerged from a skylight. With her eyes, she pointed to the staircase that led up was on our right.

- Come up, she said, Sidi El Arafî lives on the first floor.

We had barely climbed three steps when Lalla Aïcha began to breathe like a forge bellows:

- Both of you go up, she advised us, you will wait for me on the landing.

From the landing, several corridors and several other equally worn staircases led off in all directions. worn steps did not make the climb any easier.

At the end of one of the corridors was Sidi El Arafî's room. A curtain with large yellow and red stripes blocked access to it.

Lalla Aïcha joined us, sweating, choking, hiccuping scraps of prayers and formulas of appeal to divine mercy. I lifted the curtain to let my two companions pass. My mother risked a glance inside the room and asked:

- Is this where Sidi El Arafî lives?

- Yes, it is here, have no fear to approach, pilgrims whom God has sent to us. I am El Arafî, the poor blind man. I never refuse to receive the guests of God.

We entered, one after the other, leaving our slippers in the corridor.

Lalla Aïcha, punctuating each word with a deep sigh, declared:

- We are the guests of God, O our master! But we are also your guests.

- Welcome! Welcome! And if you are thirsty, we have water that refreshes parched throats. Come closer and sit down. My eyes cannot see you, but my heart tells me that you are good people. There is a child among you. My ear perceives the sound of his footsteps on the mat. Is it a girl or a boy?

- A boy, my mother answered. Addressing me she added:

- Kiss the hand of the Sharif, my son, and ask him to bless you.

The blind man stretched out his right hand into space and said:

- God bless you, my son! God bless you! Come near me!

His face radiated kindness. His face was long and thin, the color of burnt bread. The milky globes that filled his sockets did not inspire me with any fear. I stepped forward. I put my hand in his. I placed my lips on his fingers. He smiled at me and gently drew me onto his knees. His hand passed lightly over my face. It felt every volume and every hollow. It stopped on my forehead, slid towards my ears, ended at the nape of my neck.

During all this exploration he kept repeating: "God bless! God bless!"

He took a rosary which was within reach of his hand and passed it seven times over my back. While proceeding with this ceremony, he recited verses from the Koran which I knew, but I knew them imperfectly. He finally stopped and said to me:

- You must know the verse of the Throne; recite it often, it will protect you against all bad influences.

Sidi El Arafî wore a very loose cotton shirt. On his head was perched a woolen cap knitted which had certainly shrunk in the wash.

After kissing her hand once again, I went to sit down a few steps away. His wife came in turn to welcome us. She offered us very cold water that she poured from an earthenware jug. I had the impression of having seen this woman before. Perhaps at the Moorish bath. Her skin was coffee-and-milk, more coffee than milk. She spoke with the accent of Tafilalet. Her gestures were small and full of grace. I still remember her face with its very close-set eyes, tiny nose, but generous lips. I can also see her teeth, rubbed with walnut bark, wide teeth, firmly embedded in the flesh the color of dates and gums.

Sidi El Arafî was certainly not swimming in opulence. The mattresses rested on a rush mat.

The mat, yellow-brown, would not resist decrepitude for much longer. The cretonne blankets, very clean, were suffering from age. There was a shelf on the wall. Above it stood, alone, a tin sugar bowl painted red decorated with half-erased gold ink drawings. The djellaba of Sidi El Arafî hung at the head of the bed.

Sidi El Arafî asked his wife to bring him his basket. My mother, Lalla Aïcha and I remained silent. Something important was going to happen. I felt it. A wave of worry overwhelmed me. I also quivered with curiosity.

The wife of Sidi El Arafî placed before her husband a round basket of esparto grass topped with a large conical lid. The blind man reached out his arm, found the lid and slowly lifted it. I stretched out my neck. I was vaguely afraid. I expected to see a hideous monster emerge, perhaps a cloud of smoke that would have transformed before our eyes into a demon ready to satisfy our every whim.

The basket contained nothing of the sort. It gave off a sweet smell of benzoin and incense. I re-kept a closer eye on the objects that Sidi El Arafî's hand was about to take. I smiled.

Sidi El Arafî's basket reminded me of my Box of Wonders. He knew the "secret". Of course, everyone said he was very knowledgeable. A true scholar must necessarily have a box of wonders.

I understood now. Despite his blindness, he was cheerful and of a peaceful nature. He did not see the sun, the flowers and the birds, but his night was sometimes animated by the joy of the characters that each object in his basket could evoke. I too reached out my hand to touch the small objects. A look from my mother stopped my gesture.

Sidi El Arafî recited a long prayer in a low voice. His hand, fingers spread, hovered over the contents of the basket like a bird preparing to land in its nest.

He stopped and addressing us he said:

- Don't expect me to reveal the future to you. The future belongs to God, the omnipotent. These shells and amulets help me feel your sorrows, bring you closer to my heart. When I speak to you, it is my heart that you will hear. Sidi Mohammed, is that not the name of the child who accompanies you?

- Yes, my mother answered in a timid voice. The seer continued:

- Sidi Mohammed knows that what I tell you is true. A pure child is still part of the angelic legions, these beings of light. The truth being light cannot escape him... Come closer, Sidi Mohammed, plunge your hand into this basket and grab an object without seeing it.

I followed to the letter what he ordered me to do. A glass ball, the size of an egg, lodged itself in the palm of my hand. It was pleasant to the touch and of an aquatic color. I looked at it before

to hand it over to him. In its transparent mass shone a large air bubble. Tiny satellites circled this star.

Sidi El Arafî's fingers caressed the glass ball for a long time. He said nothing. His face became serious. He finally spoke slowly, detaching each syllable.

- Listen, auspicious child, and remember. The diamond is called, in the language of connoisseurs, the orphan, the solitaire because it is rare and no other stone can compete with it in hardness and beauty. Every man can be called like the diamond, the orphan or the solitaire. From now on, do not be sad anymore. If men abandon you, look inside yourself. Do you understand me well, son? How many wonders, how many wonders your heart contains! When you forget to contemplate your treasures, your health suffers and you become weak. Look at the ball that you have just given me. Inside this transparent mass, there is the image of the sun. There it is safe from all stain, there it is inaccessible to all that is not light. Be like this image, you will triumph over all obstacles. God bless you, my child! God bless you! Bring your forehead close to my lips.

He kissed me on the forehead. Then we both recited a short prayer out loud.

The emotion was strangling me. My eyes filled with tears. I was swimming in pure bliss.

This scene had made a strong impression on my mother and on Lalla Aïcha. They remained silent in an attitude of respect. Sidi El Arafî pushed aside the basket and asked for a drink. His wife filled a porous earthenware bowl with water for him and disappeared. The seer wiped his mouth with a small terry towel which he then rolled into a ball and put under one of his knees. Finally, he addressed the two women:

- God sent you to me because you have a wounded heart. I am only a humble slave but the Lord has chosen me to help my brothers and relieve their pain. Let one of you repeat the gesture of this blessed child and plunge your hand into the basket.

Lalla Aïcha sighed, while reaching out towards the basket. She grabbed a tiny shell. She handed it over to Sidi El Arafî and sighed again.

The little shell appeared miraculously white between Sidi El Arafî's brown fingers. It was transformed into a fine porcelain trinket, a gratuitous creation of a brilliant ceramist in a moment of bliss. Sidi El Arafî passed it from one hand to the other, caressed it, brought it to his lips with devotion.

He spoke:

- What is your name, generous-hearted woman?

- Aïsha, oh sheikh.

- The Prophet's favorite woman was called that. I can advise you to banish all sadness from your face; but you have suffered so much and you still suffer a lot, so you will only lend a distracted ear to my words. The wound seems deep, yet healing is near. Do you know, woman, that all pain announces a joy, that all death precedes a resurrection, that all solitude gives way to waves of tenderness? We do not have to revolt, we do not have to ask fate for an account. On this earth, we are subject to laws that we are not able to understand. Let us accept what God sends us. The storm carried the poor nest away in its whirlwinds but, with God's help, the nest will be rebuilt again. There will be spring again and flowers on the branches of the almond trees.

Lalla Aïcha moaned and began to cry. My mother took out her handkerchief to wipe her eyes. I felt happy and liberated. Sidi El Arafî's words had found fertile ground.

Their roots plunged into the blood of my veins. I heard Sidi El Arafî murmur to himself this strange song:

To the nonchalant rhythm of the days,

To the slow rhythm of the nights,

The Rosary of New Moons

Count the seasons.

He addressed the two women again:

- Tears produce the effect of a beneficial dew. If the dew is too abundant, the flowers wilt. sad and die. Stop your tears and let us recite the fatiha together.

In chorus, we repeated in a hum:

In the name of the merciful and gracious God

Praise be to God, Master of the Universe.

The clement, the merciful.

Sovereign on the day of retribution

It is you we adore, it is you whose help we implore.

Lead us on the straight path

In the path of those whom you have blessed

Not of those who have incurred your anger, nor of those who go astray.

Amine!

After a moment of silence, my mother reached out her arm in a shy gesture toward the basket. She handed it over to Sidi El Arafî the product of his fishing. It was a black pearl with multi-colored designs.

The seer smiled and asked my mother her name.

- Zoubida, she replied,

- Long ago, oh my sister, I lost my eyes. My pain had spread in warm sheets on my cheeks. I was nothing but ashes. There was no place to rest my body. There was not enough water on the earth to quench my thirst. The sun had disappeared and an eternal winter reigned over the world.

Sun and water, Lord!

Sun and water, Lord!

The Lord has heard my complaint. The earth has become ashes and motherly again. I have gone to the hill to warm my bones. I have dipped my limbs in the clear springs. My refreshed throat has found again the forgotten accents. O my sister, beware of seeing only misfortune where the will of God is expressed. The Saints of God who watch over this city grant you their protection. Visit their sanctuaries. Remember that when someone makes vows for an absent person, the guardian angel answers: May God return the favor to you.

If El Arafî ended with this surah:

Say: "God is one

He is the God to whom all beings turn in their needs.

He neither gave birth nor was given birth

He has no equal in anyone."

Everyone fell into meditative silence again. Moved by some feeling or other, I suddenly threw myself on Sidi El Arafî's hand and kissed it. That was the end of the session. The two women adjusted their veils. They stood up with difficulty, and arranged their haïks. In turn, they leaned over Sidi El Arafî to kiss his shoulder and discreetly slip a modest silver coin into the palm of his hand. We left the room, accompanied to the door by Sidi El Arafî's wishes. In the street, I felt relieved of a great weight. The world presented itself to my gaze in its original cleanliness. The sun played on the old walls, on the shop displays, on the turbans and djellabas with joy.

The predictions of Sidi El Arafî, I said to myself, would come true. But what predictions? He spoke in such veiled terms! Did I really understand the meaning of the words? I understood everything, in the presence of this man. He was no longer there, but I still had a feeling of freedom that I had not known until then. His words, which I had drunk in with avidity, had transformed in my entrails into pure music. The fatigue no longer weighed on my shoulders. I began to dance. My mother and Lalla Aïcha no longer saw me. They walked side by side, lost in thought.

Suddenly, I stopped skipping and ran to hide in the folds of my mother's haïk. This movement-
vement aroused his attention.

- What's wrong? You're as white as a sheet.

What can scare you? Speak!

I persisted in my silence and hugged my mother closer.

Lalla Aïcha intervened:

- What's wrong with him? Maybe he has a stomach ache?

- He won't tell me anything. He's shaking like a leaf. Speak, stubborn mule!

I left the folds of the haïk and took a deep breath. Finally I said:

- I was scared.

- Who were you afraid of?

- I saw the fqih, my master, pass by. He turned left, he left by the small street. He could have seen me.

- What did it matter if he had seen you?

Aren't you sick? Aren't you accompanied by your mother? A child accompanied by his mother cannot not be charged with vagrancy.

- Yes, I answered, but a sick child does not walk in the street, even accompanied by his mother.

- If we had met the fqih I would have explained to him that I had taken you to see a doctor.

- Just an excuse, he would have thought, and when I returned to the Msid, he would have made me pay dearly for my walk.

My mother sighed and said to Lalla Aïcha:

- We can't make this child listen to reason anymore, he talks like a man.
- God bless him! replied our friend.

We walked in silence. At the Bin Lamdoun bridge, a pomegranate merchant had set up shop on the ground and opened his basket. The pomegranates could not have been ripe. The rind was still green.

I stood in front of him. My mother quickly understood my attitude. She shouted to me from quite far away:

- You can take root in this place, you will not have any more pomegranates. They are still green. I do not hold you have to take care of yourself if you get eye pain.
- I want just one to taste.
- You won't get a grain of it. Come on!

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away despite my resistance. I began to whimper. My sniffles lasted quite a while. For no reason my sorrow vanished. I wiped my eyes on the sleeves of my djellaba. The spectacle of the street absorbed me. What I saw aroused thoughts in me that I expressed out loud. I chattered without interruption all the way home.

My mother did not breathe a word to our neighbors about the visit we had made to Sidi El Arafî. We lived with a chouafa. Normally, my mother should have consulted her first. But she had no confidence in her talents. I tacitly agreed with her. The practices of Kanza, the main tenant, were demonic. They were complicated, required staging, and led to multiple expenses. We were not rich enough to allow ourselves to waste money on purchasing perfumes that would please the nostrils of the djinns. Add to all these considerations my mother's distrust, the fear of seeing her poor secrets divulged. No one in the house was unaware of our situation, my mother, however, imagined the opposite. She said that we had gone with Lalla Aïcha to a distant district of the city (she could not not tell anything) but she avoided any indiscretion by pretending that we had gone on a pilgrimage to the sanctuaries of the city. My health required it.

Human remedies remain ineffective if they are not sanctified by the spiritual effluvia of men of God.

The day after our outing with Lalla Aïcha, my mother told me of her intention to keep me at home during my father's absence. She gave two solid reasons. The first: I was nothing more than a bundle of bones and my complexion was reminiscent of pomegranate peel; the second: my mother felt more and more alone, my presence made her forget her troubles.

As much for fun as to soften the city's saints' sympathy for our fate, my mother decided to take me every week to pray under the dome of a Saint. Our city is full of tombs that shelter the remains of chorfas, heads of brotherhoods, pious legislators to whom popular faith recognizes powers. Each santon has its own special visiting day: Monday for Sidi Ahmed ben Yahia, Tuesday for Sidi Ali Diab, Wednesday for Sidi Ali Boughaleb, etc. I knew all this, everyone knew it. We found what our ancestors had established simple, natural, harmonious, perfectly wise. No one would have thought of laughing at it. The days had a meaning. For me, they even had a color. Monday was associated in my imagination with light gray, Tuesday with dark gray, a little smoky, Wednesday shone with a golden glow like an autumn evening, Thursday cold and blue contrasted with the bright yellow of Friday, the paleness of Saturday announced the triumphant green of Sunday. I had never told anyone about these discoveries. If I had been a woman, if I had been rich, I would have worn a dress of the appropriate color every day. My life would have been more beautiful, more balanced, happier. But I was not a woman and we were hardly rich, especially since my husband left.

father. My mother cooked lean food, mixing barley flour with wheat bread. She laughed less, no longer told stories. We still had the long walks that we took to go to the various sanctuaries two or three times a week. We made the same complaints, asked for the same wishes to be fulfilled. We always shed the same indigent tears and set off again for our home. These visits tired me. I could not refuse to take part in them. The presence of a child made the men of God more attentive and more favorable.

One morning, we were getting ready to go out, when someone knocked on the door of the house. He asked if this was where Maalem Abdeslem, the weaver, lived. The neighbors answered in the affirmative. Kanza, the chouafa, called my mother.

- Zoubida! Zoubida! Someone is asking for "you".

My mother had naturally heard everything already.

She had turned pale. She stood in the center of the room, one hand on her chest, without saying a word. Who could be asking us? Was it a messenger of good omen or the bearer of bad news? Perhaps a creditor that my father had forgotten to tell us about! The small sum of money that my father had left us before he left had melted away. The few francs that remained were intended for the purchase of coal.

Finally, my mother answered in a slightly trembling voice:

- If anyone wants to see my husband, please tell him that he is away.

Kanza gave the order out loud to the stranger waiting behind the door of the house. A vague A whisper echoed back to him. Kanza, full of good will, translated it for us in these terms:

Zoubida! This man comes from the countryside, he brings you news of Maalem Abdeslem. He says he has something to give you.

My mother took courage. A smile lit up her face.

"That's exactly what I thought," she said, rushing toward the stairs.

She ran down the stairs. For the first time in my life, I saw her running. I followed her. I couldn't hope to outpace her. When I reached the entrance hall my mother was already talking through the half-open door with an invisible figure. The shadow said in a harsh voice:

- He is doing well, he works hard and saves all his money. He tells you not to worry about him. He gave me this for you.

I didn't see what he was handing my mother through the crack in the door. My mother rolled up the hem of her dress and carefully wrapped the treasure the stranger was giving her in its folds.

- There is still this, said the voice. That is all. I am leaving the city tomorrow morning, I will see Maalem Abdeslem as soon as I arrive at the douar. What should I tell him from you?

- Tell him that Sidi Mohammed is much better.

- Praise be to God! His health worried him greatly. I am going away; rest in peace.

- Peace be with you, messenger of good omen.

The door closed. My mother crossed the patio and hurried up the stairs.

Already, questions were flying from all the rooms. Rahma leaned out of the window, Kanza who was washing near the well dropped her buckets and soap, Fatma Bziouya abandoned her spinning wheel, all were asking questions

both my mother about my father's health, about his new job, about his whereabouts. But my mother answered with vague words followed by a procession of polite formulas. The curiosity of our neighbors proved tenacious. They all wanted to know what my father had sent us. I felt that my mother wanted to keep them waiting. When I arrived in our room, I found, placed on the small round table, a dozen eggs, a chipped earthenware pot full of butter and a bottle of dark brown oil. I looked at my mother, she was beaming with joy. Her eyes were filled with tears.

- Look, she said to me, what your father has sent us! He has not forgotten us. He is far away, but he watches over us on us. He even sent us money. Look! Look!

She opened her hand. I saw three silver coins casting their moonlight reflections.

This monologue was whispered in a low voice, but the ears that were watching for this moment caught the word money.

The magic word traveled from one mouth to another. Our half-satisfied neighbors resumed their work. They knew very well that my mother would not hide her good fortune from them for long. As for me, I was thinking mainly of our walk, which seemed very compromised. I did not regret it. My mother's gaiety won me over. Everything began to sing in me and around me. "We are rich! We are rich," I repeated to myself. A week before, I did not even dare to think of the extent of our poverty. Misery inhabited our walls, oozed from the ceiling, impregnated its odor even to our linen.

The invisible messenger appeared this morning in our existence, he swept away our fears, our apprehensions, our worries. My mother and I could trust our lucky star and be patient.

- Sidi Mohammed, go play on the terrace if it pleases you, my mother told me; today, I have too much to do to take you to the tomb of Sidi Ali M'zali, We will go, God willing, next week or one of the weeks to come.

I had no desire to go up to the terrace. The sun, a metallic white, was transforming it into hell. I leaned out of our window. Kanza was still washing near the well. Zineb's cat, overcome by the heat, was sleeping in a corner of the patio stretched out at full length. I heard my mother talking to Fatma Bziouya on the landing. Fatma was thanking her, making wishes for our prosperity. The conversation with Rahma, whom my mother went to find in her room, lasted longer. Finally, it was the chouafa's turn. She locked herself in the large reception room with my mother. Their conversation ended late in the morning.

On the round table, there were only six eggs left.

My mother had shared equally with our neighbors. I loved eggs, the sight of them made my mouth water. Before preparing the meal, my mother went up to the terrace. I heard her chatting with the black woman who lived in a neighboring house. In the evening, the whole neighborhood knew that a messenger had come from a distant countryside, laden with various riches that were intended for us.

Lalla Aïcha arrived unexpectedly. I was not surprised. Her presence was for me linked to all family events. Our joy, especially that of my mother, would not be complete if she did not share it with her old friend.

My mother hurried to set the table. She sacrificed the six eggs. We ate them scrambled.

During the meal, she recounted in detail the event of the day. She described the physical appearance of my father's envoy (she had barely caught a glimpse of him in the shadows), spoke of her surprise, her apprehensions, thanked God for his gifts and prayed fervently to watch over his humble servants, of whom we were the most humble.

- And you! she asked Lalla Aïcha, how is your business going?

- Praise be to God! Praise be to God! Come see me tomorrow, I have a surprise for you.
- Could it be that your husband has come to his senses?
- He is taking that path and paying dearly for the suffering he has inflicted on me. But come tomorrow morning, you will know much more. Now, I must leave you. I came by, just to ask you to come tomorrow.

Lalla Aïcha stood up, wrapped herself in her haik and headed towards the stairs.

Chapter XI

With great blows of dishcloths, Lalla Aïcha chased away the flies. She scolded them like terrible children.

- Come on, get out, you miserable creatures; you dirty everything you touch; when I try to rest again, you bother me with your agitation and your buzzing.

She noticed our presence at the threshold of the room. Her arm remained suspended; a smile lit up her face.

- Welcome. Come in, sit down, and relax. These flies are becoming unbearable. The heat and the flies, so many calamities that Allah sends to his faithful to test their patience. Speak a little, Zoubida, do not remain silent.

My mother would have liked to satisfy our hostess's desire, but how could she get a word in edgewise? How could she engage in conversation with a person seized by an extermination fever who ran from one corner of the square to the other, waving an immense rag as a banner? The flies, it is true, taunted her a little. They would swoop down in packs on a cushion, wait for her, pretending to perform meticulous ablutions, but as soon as they saw her approaching, they would intone a war song, take flight, circle for a moment around the ceiling, and then dive straight onto the bed or a mattress.

Lalla Aïcha gave up the fight. She slipped away for a second to go to her kitchen to get the copper kettle and the brazier. The already prepared tray stood in the center of the room. A veil embroidered with gold covered it. Underneath, through transparency, I could see the tin teapot and the glasses. Finally, Lalla and my mother began a real conversation, I mean a dialogue. It began, like all women's dialogues, with questions about each other's health. They had seen each other the day before. They had exchanged the same questions and the same answers. Not quite to be exact: Lalla Aïcha had had trouble sleeping at the beginning of the night, but she had quickly realized that it was only because of the hardness of the mattress. She changed beds, slept like a stone.

- Do stones sleep? I asked with a falsely innocent air.

- Shut up, my mother told me, or ask reasonable questions.

This incident reminded my mother of the story of Zineb, our neighbor's daughter. She had dropped a stone on his big toe, his right foot, my mother said.

- Allah! Did this happen long after I left? asked Lalla Aïsha, showing signs of worry.

- No, replied my mother, it happened two years ago; I remember that day as if it were yesterday. I was chopping mallow on the terrace when I heard him scream...

Just then, a baby's cry filled the house. My mother's eyes widened, taken aback. We looked at each other in surprise and burst into a big laugh. I laughed so much that tears flooded my cheeks.

- Praise be to God! Praise be to God! Laughter is a blessing from God, a man's voice said.

I turned to see the visitor who dared to enter a room where two women who were neither his wives nor his relatives were chatting. A woman stood in the doorway.

Had I heard correctly? I looked at my mother and Lalla Aïcha in turn, but neither of them shared my astonishment.

- Welcome, Salama, said Lalla Aïcha. My mother was already asking the newcomer questions about her health, the health of her friends and her children. She had no children as I learned later. Salama was a professional matchmaker. Lalla Aïcha turned to my mother.

- This is the surprise I had for you, she said to him.

- But, what a pleasant surprise! It has been so long since I had the joy of meeting Salama. The last time we saw each other was at the wedding of Aisha's cousin, the mat merchant's wife. It was a very beautiful wedding!

-Today, Salama has things to tell us; have you guessed what it is about?

- No, really, I don't know.

I knew my mother well. Her eyes didn't tell the whole truth.

Salama did not deign to glance at my modest person. I must have seemed ridiculously small to her, ridiculously puny. Salama belonged to that vanished race that gave birth to the legend of the giants. She advanced with a majestic step towards the large divan, and settled herself in the place of honor. Her bust straight, her hands flat on her knees, she remained silent, static as a block of granite.

Not a muscle in her face moved; only her eyes rested slowly on each object. I was vaguely afraid of her. She attracted me at once and made me feel uneasy. Curled up against a cushion, I waited for her to speak. Her big lips, surmounted by a slight moustache, moved imperceptibly. No sound came out. The desire to hear her speak made me tremble. I no longer even noticed whether my mother and Lalla Aïcha were silent or chatting as usual. She closed her eyes, opened them again and in her man's voice declared that after tea, she would have plenty of time to talk to her little sisters about the events that were in preparation. She added:

- I can tell you that big events are in the pipeline.

A funny little laugh, of mad gaiety, escaped Lalla Aïcha. This laugh was so young, so fresh, so spring-like. that Lalla Aïcha blushed with confusion. She got up hastily and went to get the sugar and the mint.

My mother began to recount her memories of the weddings she had attended. The tea was prepared in record time. Lalla Aïcha served everyone. She handed me my glass with two fingers of tea in the bottom. I protested. I asked for a full glass like I had at home.

My mother frowned, biting her lower lip to show her disapproval. Salama finally noticed my presence. She smiled. Large but firmly planted yellow teeth lit up her face.

- Give this young man some tea, I'll give him a cake.

She reached into the pocket of her caftan and pulled out an embroidered handkerchief. It contained two shortbreads and a gazelle horn. I had the gazelle horn and the women shared the shortbreads.

After another silence, Lalla Aïcha and my mother, consumed by curiosity, asked in one voice:

- Tell us, Salama, don't keep us waiting.

Tell.

- Yes, I had better start. Will you have the patience to listen to me until the end?

- Tell me, Salam a! Tell me! the two women demanded eagerly.

- I know your two hearts, they are noble and open to compassion. Lalla Aïcha, I have been very wrong towards you, will you ever be able to forgive me?

Lalla Aïcha made a gesture of protest with her hand. She let out a long sigh. My mother, in turn, let out a deep sigh. Before continuing her story, Salama sighed too. I couldn't not do like everyone else, a complaint expired on my lips. No one noticed. Salama was already speaking.

- God wanted (and everything is wanted by Him) that I be the intermediary in this marriage that made us all unhappy. You, Lalla Aïcha, because you temporarily lost the affection of your husband, Lalla Zoubida suffered because a long friendship binds you, Sidi Larbi realized quite quickly that he had unnecessarily complicated his life, as for the hairdresser's daughter, from a young girl she will soon be a divorced woman. She will have all the difficulties in finding a husband. Thus is expressed the will of our Creator.

He put us on this earth to suffer and to worship.

Everyone sighed again and Salama continued:

- It all began the day Kebira, the daughter of my revered master Moulay Abdeslem, asked me to buy henna for her. I had barely arrived at the spice souk when someone discreetly touched my shoulder. I turned around, Moulay Larbi was standing in front of me, smiling and affable as usual.

We exchanged the usual greetings. We talked at length about the bad weather that had raged, if you remember well, for a month. I asked him about you, Lalla Aïcha!

- She's fine, he told me. He then lowered his eyes and assumed a resigned attitude.

- What's the matter, Moulay Larbi? Are you hiding something serious from me about the people in your house?

- No, replied Moulay Larbi, I am not hiding anything from you, but you guessed it, I am very tormented. If you wanted, you could help me calm my soul.

As you can imagine, I was more and more intrigued. A donkey loaded with sacks of sugar passed between us two, separating us. I pressed myself against the wall and signaled to Moulay Larbi to join me. He exchanged a few insults with a passerby who had jostled him and finally came very close to me to talk to me about what was worrying him.

- Yes, he said to me, you could help me. My situation is improving day by day. I earn more than enough to support a family and even several households. The greatest pain in my life is not having a child. Of course, I esteem and respect Lalla Aïcha, my current wife; I believe this esteem and respect are shared, but I cannot look to the future with serenity until I have an heir.

I interrupted him to advise him to see a doctor.

- Don't interrupt me, Salama, he said to me, I don't believe in doctors or remedies. In my case, there is only one remedy, and if you wanted, you could help me get it.

I opened my eyes wide and pretended not to understand.

- The remedy, continued Moulay Larbi, is to find myself a second wife.

- I cannot do this, Moulay Larbi, I love Lalla Aïcha too much to be the cause of her sorrow.

- Lalla Aïcha will not be sad, she wants to see me as the father of a child. However, I would ask you to keep our conversation secret. It would not be appropriate to inform her of an event whose consequences could hurt her self-esteem.

Before I could answer his argument, he slipped a brand new silver coin into my hands. He went away, recommending that I think carefully about the matter and come and see him at his workshop during the week. A few days later, I passed by the workshop...

Salama's story fascinated me, but a pressing need forced me to interrupt him to ask to my mother if I could go downstairs and relieve myself.

My interruption was met with anger. My mother shouted at me to go where I liked and not to bother the company with incongruous words any more. I left reluctantly. I ran down the stairs. The door to the offices was in a corner of the ground floor. It was closed. I threw myself on it to break it down. Someone coughed inside. I had to wait. I started crying out loud. I danced from one foot to the other, all the while proclaiming my pain. The door opened abruptly. I didn't even take the time to look at the face of the occupant and I locked myself in the small room. I didn't take long to leave, my face joyful, happy at the thought of going to listen to the rest of Moulay Larbi's fascinating story.

I was setting foot on the first step of the stairs when a woman called out to me in an angry voice:

- Badly brought up child, can't you close the toilet door after use? Go and close it! This is not your home, you are a guest. Guests should be polite and behave themselves in a strange house.

I lowered my nose. I went with a stiff air to close the door. It was with an equally stiff air that I allowed myself to answer this calamitous woman.

- Here, I am not a guest, I am the son of Lalla Zoubida, Lalla Aïcha's friend. Lalla Aïcha would not be not happy if I told him you called me "bad child".

- You are a badly brought up child, go tell him, you rude boy! You puny brat! Do you think your Lalla Aïcha is going to have me cut off your head? If you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to take my scissors and cut off your ears.

I let out a scream.

- Mom! Lalla Aïcha! This woman wants to cut off my ears! Oh! my ears! my ears!

Lalla Aïcha leaned out of the window.

- What's wrong? What's wrong?

The woman on the ground floor tried to explain the situation to her, but I was shouting so loud that her sentence didn't reach the upper floor. She made hand signals to me to be quiet. I continued to yell and stamp my feet. My mother's head popped up next to Lalla Aïcha's. They were both asking for explanations. Neighbors had come out of their rooms to help my enemy.

Salama's voice calmed everyone.

- He's only a child, she said, no one should hold it against him if he forgets or makes a mistake. It would not be reasonable for an argument to break out because of a childish prank. Sidi Mohammed, stop crying and come upstairs quickly, I found another gazelle horn in my pocket that will surely please you.

I wiped my face on the bottom of my djellaba. I proudly climbed the stairs.

The women had resumed their work. The house fell silent again. When I entered Lalla Aïcha's room, my mother could not help but give me a look that spoke volumes. I dreaded that look more than anything else in the world. It struck me down, reduced me to nothing.

Salama offered me her protection. She stretched out her arm towards me, smiled at me with all her teeth. On the tray, the gazelle horn was waiting for me. I grabbed it, but I was unable to bring it to my mouth.

Lalla Aïcha was busy preparing more tea. Nestled between two cushions, I tried to make myself forget. I stood with my eyes lowered. I heard my mother say, addressing Salama:

- What was wrong with that meat? Was it really too lean or not fresh enough?

- According to all the people in the neighborhood, it was of excellent quality. Only, the daughter of Si Abderrah-man was looking for an excuse. Moulay Larbi is the same age as his father. On the other hand, his means do not allow him to satisfy all his fantasies; then, I have already told you, this girl is crazy. Since when has anyone seen a hairdresser's daughter demand that her husband buy her a pair of gold bracelets? Demand money, in cash, to pay for trivialities? Organize teas for her so-called friends? Play the tom-tom at every opportunity?

Lalla Aïcha risked a question.

- But, didn't she work? Did she never learn a trade?

"She embroiders the uppers of slippers.

Moulay Larbi gave her a job or two, but her work lingered on the loom for a long time, it was poorly executed and she always wanted double the normal price charged by other embroiderers. Moulay Larbi stopped giving her work. She then accused him of having improper relations with women in distant neighborhoods. Under the pretext, no doubt, of giving them uppers, he took advantage of the opportunity to have conversations with them unworthy of a Believer.

"We know that Moulay Larbi would never engage in such practices. These are the lying words of a stupid and jealous girl.

"All this would be of no consequence if his mother did not interfere in household affairs at every moment. She comes three or four times a week to sniff every object, give advice, express her displeasure about this or that, encourage her daughter to be more demanding, flatter her pride by repeating that she is much too pretty for an old fogey who smells of sweat and leather and who shows himself incapable of spoiling his young wife as she deserves.

"Poor Moulay Larbi naturally suffers the repercussions of this bad advice. Ah! He is very much to be pitied, Moulay Larbi! He has encountered nothing but sadness and pain in this marriage. He rarely comes to see you, Lalla Aïcha, because he is aware of having committed a serious fault towards you. He has not forgotten what you have done for him. Neither his mother nor his sister would have helped him in adversity as you have done so generously. But men are weak beings!

"Since his situation had improved, he had only one dream, that of having a young wife to brighten up his life of work and struggle. Our times are becoming more and more strange. Young people

Today's girls are no longer those of yesterday. They lack reserve, ignore modesty, disregard their dignity to obtain a passing satisfaction. They prefer to marry brainless young men whom they govern as they please.

"Moulay Larbi is a man, so he needs a woman of his calibre. This woman is you, Lalla Aicha. His mistake was to forget her momentarily."

All eyes turned to the door. We had just heard a quiet cough.

- Who is there? said Lalla Aicha.
- A relative.
- Is that you, Zhor? Come in!

Zhor showed his little face, which was heavily made up.

- Can I have a sprig of mint?
- Here is some mint, but take the time to drink a sip of tea with us.
- Thanks, I'll make some, my husband will be here soon.
- He's not here yet, so stay with us until he arrives.

Zhor decided to go through the door.

She was bursting with youth and freshness. She wore brightly colored clothes. She advanced with small steps, held out her hand to my mother, put her index finger to her lips, held out her hand again to Salama, and repeated the same gesture. I wanted her to sit next to me. My wish was granted. She sat down at my side. Her little hand caressed my cheek.

After the usual questions and answers about the health of each, Zhor got to the heart of the matter. She wanted to know if the divorce between Moulay Larbi and the hairdresser's daughter had been pronounced. As all the women showed their ignorance with various expressions, Zhor smiled broadly. Proud to become the focal point of all eyes, she launched into a brilliant monologue.

- Mother Salama must not be unaware of what is happening in this household, but everyone knows her discretion. However, all the inhabitants of the El Adoua neighborhood are aware of the difficulties that Moulay Larbi encounters daily with his young wife. Besides, this girl is crazy or possessed. For nothing, she threatens those around her to break everything in the house, climbs onto the terrace with the intention of throwing herself into the street over the wall. I have my information from a reliable source.

So, last Tuesday, she asked her husband to buy her for that very evening, an embroidered scarf with long fringes. Moulay Larbi returned two hours later with a splendid garnet scarf with multi-colored designs. The hairdresser's daughter barely looked at it, took it between her thumb and forefinger, and threw it into the courtyard of the house with a grimace of disgust.

- Who do you take me for? she said to her husband.

For a country girl? How dare you give me a scarf in such vulgar colors? Certainly, you must not have paid much for it! Know that when an old bearded man like you takes as a wife a girl who could be his daughter, he must give in to all her whims and offer her only what costs the most. I give you the gift of my youth and my beauty, and in exchange, you bring me a scarf just pretty enough to cover a negress's head.

Moulay Larbi, very angry, began to insult him very violently. The hairdresser's daughter grabbed a

glass, broke it on the windowsill and, with the sharp piece that remained in her hand, she tried to cut her throat. Moulay Larbi rushed to stop her action. She began to scream, to call the neighbors to witness, claiming that her husband was beating her, that her situation was becoming intolerable, that she never had enough to eat and that she had to make do with patched clothes, so great was her husband's greed.

Salama admitted that she was not aware of this scene.

- Who told you that, little sister?

- People! In Fez, no one is ignorant of anything about anyone. I also know that the hairdresser's daughter is particularly lazy. She does not take off her covers before the *Louli prayer*. When Moulay Larbi spends the night with her, in the morning, he leaves without breakfast, without even drinking a glass of tea. Often meat and vegetables wait until the evening when Lalla, the hairdresser's daughter, decides to cook them. Moulay Larbi will not endure such a life for long. Already, he sometimes sleeps in his workshop rather than join his young wife. He is too modest to talk about all this to Lalla Aicha who has received him, as is proper, very coldly since his marriage.

A murmur arose among the listeners. My mother tried to say something, then thought better of it, sighed, and fell silent again. Everyone sighed with conviction.

Zhor had nothing more to say.

Suddenly, all of them began to speak at once. They spoke of the barber's daughter, of the barber himself, of his wife, of his late mother (may her bones go and keep the flames of Hell alive). They recalled many stories that had happened in this family, which had not always ended to the advantage of its members. According to them, the barber, his mother, his wife and his daughter represented the scum of society; when they died, even dogs would not want their carcasses. They were barely human beings and almost not Muslims.

On the whole face of the earth, there was no people more generous, more frank, more modest than the people of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). Such individuals had no place in such a noble community. Moreover, neither the Christians nor the Jews would want them.

The tone of this diatribe had risen very high. Salama's voice rolled like thunder, those of the other women imitated sometimes the sound of a waterfall, sometimes the movement of dry leaves by a late autumn wind.

What they said slipped through my mind without a trace. I did not understand the meaning of all the words. It mattered little to me to understand. I was attentive only to the music of the syllables. I listened so intently that I forgot the glass of tea in my hand. My fingers relaxed. The tea spilled onto my knees. The verbal intoxication ended abruptly. Everyone looked at me in terrifying silence. Surprise and fury shone in all the eyes fixed on me. In vain did I search my helpless brain for the shadow of an excuse. No explanation could save me. Crying would do no good. I looked at each woman, raised my eyes to the ceiling and heaved a deep sigh.

Chapter XII

That day, from the morning, a new element floated in the air that capsized hearts. Even Lalla Kanza, the chouafa, an austere person if ever there was one, sang a fashionable verse. I listened to her from our window. Her voice quavered a little but the words: heart, gazelle's eye, rose lips reached my ears. These words reminded me of new and precious objects that had slept for a long time under a mattress of dust. They rose, free, in the white summer sky, cheerfully shaking wings to which tiny and persistent spider webs still clung. For a long time, I repeated in a kind of bliss: gazelle's eye, rose lips! I found these words pretty, which, for me, had no meaning. I did not know what a gazelle's eye was made of, or even a whole gazelle. Lip of pink evoked an image more accessible to my imagination. Besides, I quickly ended up admitting that a song did not need to have a meaning. I promised myself that I would compose songs later. It did not seem difficult to me. The vocabulary was already familiar to me. I would talk about the night, about moon-colored foreheads, about teeth like pearls strung on a strand of silk, about lips of rose or coral. It was always a question of a woman's name. Which one would I choose? I searched for a long time. Aïcha quickly materialized into a large and talkative woman: Lalla Aïcha, my mother's friend. Rahma lived with us. Her first name could not inspire me. Zoubida, that's my mother. It was perhaps not very correct to put the name of one's own mother in a song, Zineb gave me too much trouble, Fatma! I could see her from where I was sitting kneading her bread in the middle of her room. No one can sing the name of a woman who, on her knees, on the floor, kneads dough in a pottery dish!

Maybe I would choose Zhor or Khadija. Rather Zhor.

Sweet memory!

Painted face, smiling mouth!

My cheeks flush at the memory of the caress of your hand!

Zhor, who knew so much about the marriage of the hairdresser's daughter Si Abderrahman, still occupied my mind. I had made a cozy nest for him in my being.

Rahma in turn began a cantilena. In a melancholy tune she called all the saints to her aid. She complained of her thinness and her insomnia. Not thin at all, she snored, according to her daughter, enough to make the earthenware bowls on their shelf tremble.

I didn't understand the rest of the poem devoted to the eyes of some young man, eyes like these to stars topped with eyebrows like curved sabers.

Kanza, the chouafa, and Rahma, the plowmaker's wife, had set the tone. Fatma Bziouya followed their example. My mother, timidly, then in an increasingly firm voice, filled the house with

his cooing. I decided to make my modest contribution to this concert. To participate, there were no rules to follow, no special conditions to fulfill. Everyone simply let themselves go with their inspiration.

My repertoire was reduced to two words:

O night! O moon!

I launched myself:

O night! O moon!

If the poem could seem meager, I swear by the Almighty that the musical combinations it inspired in me would deserve to remain engraved in memory. However, a human brain would have had infinite difficulty in recording the sum of variations, audacious fantasies, and unforeseen rhythms that, in this moment of total freedom, gave birth to my lyrical delirium.

In the midst of this intoxication, there burst like thunder in a beautiful April sun, a knock at the front door. A deathly silence darkened the house. At the second knock,

Rahma cried:

- Who's there?

A fragile child's voice meowed an incomprehensible sentence. The blood drained from my cheeks. I leaned out of the window. Aunt Kanza invited the child to enter the patio. After two minutes of intolerable waiting, the sickly silhouette of a little boy of about ten years old appeared. I recognized him, it was Allal El Yacoubi, a student at our Koranic school. Panicked, I rushed behind the bed, looking for a hiding place. My limbs trembled, my teeth chattered in my mouth, the cold crept into my chest, settling there forever.

My mother was talking. She was saying:

- He is better. You will thank the fqih for sending you to get news of him, you will tell him that he is not yet well enough to return to the Msid. Go, my son, may Allah open the doors of knowledge to you.

The house fell into a thick silence. My mother called out:

- Sidi Mohammed! Ya, Sidi Mohammed! Where are you?

I didn't answer.

She got angry.

- Where are you, you son of a dog? Can't you answer anymore?

Unable to open my mouth, I opposed these insults with an offensive silence.

She lamented, calling heaven, her house, the noble Islamic community to witness her misfortune.

- Woe! Woe! To be abandoned by one's husband and to live with a son saddled with a mule's head is such a sad fate that one would not dare wish it on one's enemy, even if he were a Jew or a Nazarene! God! Hear my tears! Answer my prayers.

The gate of heaven must have been wide open. Zineb, who had gone to do an errand, came back out of breath. Everyone heard him shout from the alley.

- Mother Zoubida! Mother Zoubida! I bring you good news, good news!

Good news?

My mother stopped ranting at me. Zineb, suffocated by emotion, stood in the middle of the patio and tried, but failed, to explain what was going on. No one understood the reason for her excitement. The women had abandoned their work. They watched, some through a skylight, some through a window, Zineb gesticulating in the middle of the courtyard. I left my hiding place. Zineb stopped, exhausted. All the women began to question her. She raised her head in the direction of our room and finally managed to say:

- I saw in the street ... the Maâlem ... Abdeslem! An incredulous silence greeted this declaration.

Rahma broke it:

- What are you talking about, you little liar?

- I saw Ba Abdeslem not far from the flour merchant, near the bitter orange mosque. He is holding two chickens in his hand. I left him chatting with a countryman who has a face as long as a jug.

Kanza from his room said:

- If what Zineb says is true, we are all very happy and we wish Maâlem Abdeslem welcome back.

My mother said nothing. She joined me in our room and stood in the middle of the room with her arms swinging. She had left the earth, she was swimming in joy to the point of losing the use of her tongue.

I rushed towards the stairs. I didn't know exactly where I was going. I had walked about ten of steps when my father's voice came from the ground floor.

- Is there no one there, may I come in? The tone had not changed.

- Go, Maâlem Abdeslem. Today is a blessed day. God has returned you to your people, may he be praised, replied Kanza the seer.

- God fill you with his blessings, said my father.

I turned back. I wanted to see him enter the room. The staircase seemed to me a dark place, it was in no way indicated to see my father again on his return from such a long journey. My mother had not moved. She seemed a little unwell to me. I myself no longer felt very well. My forehead was covered with cold droplets and my hands were shaking slightly. My father's heavy step still echoed on the stairs. A shadow darkened the door of our room. My father entered.

- Greetings to you.

- Greetings to you, my mother murmured. Did you have a good trip?

- Praise be to God, I had no trouble, but I am a little tired... Sidi Mohammed, come and let me take a closer look at you.

I went over to my father. He got rid of the two chickens. He put them on the ground. Their legs were tied with a palm branch. They began to flap their wings, to cluck in terror. My father intimidated me. I found him changed. His face had taken on a terracotta color that disconcerted me. His djellaba smelled of earth, sweat and horse dung. When he put his hands under my armpits and lifted me up to the height of his turban, I regained complete confidence and burst out laughing. My mother came out of her stupor. She laughed like a little girl, grabbed the chickens to take them to the kitchen, came back

helping my father empty his hood that contained eggs, took out of a doum bag a pot of butter, a bottle of oil, a packet of olives, a piece of peasant cake made of coarse semolina. Seized by a fever of activity, she put away our riches, blew on the fire, came and went with a hurried step without stopping to talk, to ask questions, to gently scold me.

Sitting on my father's knees, I told him the events that had filled our lives during his absence. I told them in my own way, without order, without that blind obedience to the strict truth of the facts that makes the stories of adults devoid of flavor and poetry. I jumped from one scene to another, I distorted the details, I invented them when necessary. At every moment, my mother tried to correct what I was saying; my father begged her to leave us in peace.

The neighbors would loudly wish us lasting happiness and prosperous health.

U-yous broke out on the terrace. Women from the adjoining houses thus loudly demonstrated the part they took in our joy. My mother never stopped thanking each one others.

Driss El Aouad arrived from his workshop. His wife informed him of my father's return. He called:

- Maâlem Abdeslem! We are very happy to see you back among your people.
- Come up for a moment, Driss.

Driss, the plow maker, was the same age as my father. They were both in their forties. They had known each other for a long time and had great respect for each other. Driss El Aouad came up to our house.

The two men, after the usual greetings, chatted familiarly. They talked about the quality of the harvests, the prices of foodstuffs, and mutual friends.

Driss said to my father:

- You have just arrived and perhaps even the people in your house do not know it yet. The divorce between Moulay Larbi and the hairdresser's daughter was pronounced yesterday before a notary.
- Praise be to God! Moulay Larbi will finally be able to find peace of mind, the peace of blessed men. I knew that Moulay Larbi's madness would be temporary. Isn't it madness to want to drive several teams at once? It is already so difficult to get along with one woman, to live in harmony with the children of one's flesh. Moulay Larbi has tasted the bitter fruit of experience, here he is again among normal men, we must praise the Lord.

My mother called me in a low voice:

- Sidi Mohammed! Come and get the tray.

I went to find her in the kitchen. The tray was heavy in my arms as a child. I performed this function with a certain pride. My father poured the tea.

The conversation between the two men resumed. It gradually turned into a hum. Fatigue invaded my limbs. I felt sad and alone. No! I didn't want to sleep, I didn't want to cry.

I had friends too. They would share my joy. I pulled my Box of Wonders from under the bed. I opened it religiously. All the figures of my dreams were waiting for me there.

Fez, 1952.